the weekly Standard

JUNE 11, 2007

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DANGEROUS ILLUSIONS
REUEL MARC GERECHT

THE OTHER WAR

MICHAEL FUMENTO reports from Afghanistan

Paktika, Afghanistan, March 20, 2007, patrolling the border with Pakistan

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How the West *Really* Lost God

A new look at secularization

What secularization theory assumes is that religious belief comes ontologically first for people and that it goes on to determine or shape other things they do—including such elemental personal decisions as whether they marry and have children. Implied here is a striking, albeit widely assumed, view of how one social phenenomenon powers another: that religious believers are more likely to produce families because religious belief somehow comes first. . . . What has not been explained, but rather assumed throughout that chain of argument, is why the causal relationship between belief and practice should always run that way instead of the other, at least some of the time. . . . In brief, it is not only possible but highly plausible that many Western European Christians did not just stop having children and families because they became secular. At least some of the time, the record suggests, they also became secular because they stopped having children and families.

—Mary Eberstadt

Terrorism, the Military, and the Courts

What kind of process is due detainees?

This essay . . . is for those who live in that gulf between the centers of gravity of elite and mass opinion—those not content to give the president a free hand in a messy, unending quasi-war but also suspicious that courts can and should supervise detentions and interrogations and doubtful that such operations are, in any event, easily subjected to absolute moral rules. This is uncomfortable territory, for the slope is indeed as slippery as slopes get—and slippery, I should say, on a hill with two distinct bottoms. At one lies a government capable of torture with impunity, the very essence of tyranny. At the other lies a government incapacitated from expeditiously taking those steps necessary to protect the public from catastrophic attack. . . . In reality, however, this is the intellectual and practical territory in which wars have been won with liberty preserved.

—Benjamin Wittes

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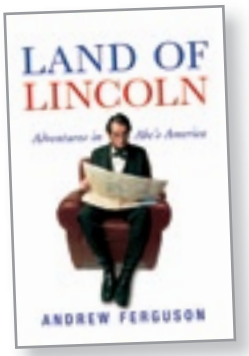
Ferguson's Lincoln

The Scrapbook is feeling like a proud papa these days—or maybe a doting uncle. That's because our friend and colleague Andrew Ferguson has just published *Land of Lincoln: Adventures in Abe's America* (Grove/Atlantic, $24), and in The Scrapbook's considered opinion, if there's one book every Standard reader must devour this summer, it's *Land of Lincoln*.

Why do we say this? First, Weekly Standard readers already know Andy's hallmarks. He's a writer of exceptional skill, incapable of producing a dull sentence. He carries wisdom, erudition, and startling insight with a lightness and finesse that must be read to be believed. There's his understated wit, discerning eye, and instinct for the absurd. His reporter's antennae are exceptionally well-tuned; Andy never fails to capture the felicitous detail. And all these talents are on display in *Land of Lincoln*.

So what, you ask, another Lincoln book? To which we reply: This is not just any Lincoln book. Like many Americans, Andy Ferguson (born and raised in Illinois) grew up with a fascination for the sixteenth president, whose life and death are so central to the story of America. But what intrigues him about Lincoln is not so much the familiar facts—the log cabin birthplace, the Gettysburg Address, the homely face and mordant jokes—as the shadow Lincoln casts over his countrymen. Since the assassination at Ford's Theatre in 1865, Lincoln's drama has been cast and recast, the essentials of his life have been plumbed and reinvented, the meaning of Lincoln—to politics, history, folklore, psychology—has evolved with every succeeding generation.



So Andy embarks on a road trip in search of Lincoln's America. Or America's Lincoln. We meet collectors who accumulate sacred relics, scholars who try to make Lincoln "relevant," Abe Lincoln impersonators, management gurus, and a galaxy of people whose vision of Lincoln gives meaning to their lives.

Land of Lincoln is about a journalist's quest, but it's also a matchless portrait of our times, certain places, the national character (both hilarious and poignant), the complex life of a deceptively simple man, and the meeting of the present and past in our country. The Scrapbook cannot think of a better introduction to the great subject of Abraham Lincoln, or a funnier, more trenchant and affecting postcard from America. ♦

A Friend in Need

We felt like we were having a flashback the other day when we read about the continuing saga of Vinod Gupta, the Nebraska entrepreneur and friend of Bill and Hillary Clinton. It seems Gupta is in the midst of a nasty legal battle with shareholders in infoUSA, the company he founded in Omaha in 1972.

Gupta enjoys a particularly close relationship with the Clintons, raising money for their campaigns, playing golf, even staying overnight in the Lincoln Bedroom. He once kept a website devoted to all the pictures he had taken in the Clintons' company. Which website, you will no doubt be shocked to discover, has since been taken down.

Gupta's generosity is impressive. According to the *Washington Post*, Gupta has paid President Clinton $200,000 to give a speech to infoUSA employees; donated $1 million, maybe more, to underwrite the Clintons' millennium bash in the White House and on the National Mall; delivered more than $220,000 to the Democratic National Committee during Hillary's 2000 campaign; donated $5,000 to Hillary's political action committee in 2006; paid the former president millions in consulting fees; and over the last four years loaned his corporate jet to the Clintons for trips to places like Jamaica and Acapulco.

Gupta billed the Clintons' travel to his company as a "business development" expense. Which we suppose is true, if by "development" you mean currying favor with powerful figures in order to enhance your reputation.

We're not sure what exactly infoUSA does, but it makes a lot of money: more than $400 million in revenue, according to the *New York Times*. Some of the shareholders, however, claim that Gupta has abused his position as CEO and chairman of the board for personal gain. And what gain! According to court documents, besides his ample compensation, Gupta enjoyed several vacation properties, private jets, cars, a skybox at the University of Nebraska football stadium, and a yacht with an "all female crew." No wonder Bubba likes him. ♦

Obama Messiah Watch

More hard-hitting journalism from the Gray Lady:

> Barack Obama is a wily player of pickup basketball . . . his escape from the sport of politics, but also a purer version of it, with no decorous speeches, no careful consensus—just unrestrained competition. . . .

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(Classic Steiner, reprinted from our issue of December 30, 1996)

Mr. Robinson, now the coach of Brown University's men's team, said the 6-foot-2 senator is too skinny to be an imposing presence, but he is fast, with good wind even when he was a smoker. Mr. Obama is left-handed, and his signature move is to fake right and veer left, surprising players used to guarding right-handed competitors. . . . He is gentleman enough to call fouls on himself: Steven Donziger, a law school classmate, has heard Mr. Obama mutter, "my bad," tossing the other team the ball.

—From Jodi Kantor's "One Place Where Obama Goes Elbow to Elbow," June 1, 2007, New York Times, *pg. A1.*

Sounds fishy

This week in the world of environmental extremism, greens in the Pacific Northwest are protesting hydroelectric dams (one of the cleanest sources of electricity) because they make it more difficult for salmon to migrate. In Oregon and California, where more than 70,000 homes rely on power from the Klamath dams, a group called the Klamath Riverkeeper wants to see the dams meet their demise. Incidentally, its umbrella organization, Waterkeeper Alliance, is headed by none other than one of *Time* magazine's "Heroes for the Planet," Robert Kennedy Jr.

Shikha Dalmia, an occasional contributor to these pages, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* last week that the environmentalists won't even accept proposals by the dam owner, PacifiCorp, to install $350 million fish ladders to help the poor salmon find their way. And while they claim to care about the fish, Klamath Riverkeeper has also sued a fish hatchery financed by PacifiCorp, claiming it releases algae and toxic emissions. Even though the hatchery significantly increases the Chinook salmon catch—by at least 25 percent a year—they want to shut it down (which would not coincidentally decrease the fish population and bolster their argument for destroying the dams to save the salmon).

The real goal, of course, is to reduce the human habitat. Dalmia quotes from the platform of the mystical preservationist group Deep Ecology, which migrated (without ladders) from Europe in the 1980s: "The flourishing of nonhuman life requires a decrease in human population." The Scrapbook is curious if any of these members would care to volunteer first. ♦

Help Wanted

Contributing editor Charles Krauthammer seeks a research assistant. Send résumé to jobs@charleskrauthammer.com. ♦

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Casual

Impaler of Fish

In our over-eroticized culture, it is common to hear people rate their enthusiasms by saying they are "better than sex." I reluctantly volunteer that information about fly fishing. For I like "spawning" as much as any non-fisherman—more even. But unlike fly fishing, it's a hard activity to perform outdoors for 12 hours straight without the police getting involved.

Like most fly-rodders, I religiously practice catch-and-release. I don't kill fish not only because I like them, but because eating them would mean fishing had a point. And the very point to me of fishing is its pointlessness. Unless the point, if there must be one, is catching fish.

Mind you, I'm not some precious trout teapot, who thinks I'm only fishing if I'm standing in some pristine freestone stream chasing finicky rainbows and browns. I like fishing too much to discriminate. I keep a rod and waders in the car to fish whenever it's appropriate, and even when it's not. In addition to rivers and lakes, I'll fish cemetery ponds, strip-mall retention basins, and have even dodged errant drives at golf course water hazards.

If there's water with fish in it, I'll try to catch them. And when I do, I release them to get caught again, or to carry on with their lives (they probably prefer the latter). There's a natural condescension, of course, that catch-and-release fishermen feel for their low-sloping forehead, meat-bucket-filling brothers, who show up to the local fishing hole, disgracing fish by catching them on PowerBait that looks like pink gumballs (a food not found in nature). More egregiously, they are keeping my fun. If we were playing basketball together, I wouldn't pop the ball at the end of the game. Or, to put it in terms they'd better understand, if we were watching NASCAR together, I wouldn't put their big-screen TV in my trunk at the end of the Dodge Avenger 500. If they're that hungry, I like to tell them, then go down to the Waffle House when they're done fishing.

There's a reverse elitism too, however, practiced by the meat-bucket mafia, perhaps best exemplified by the writer John McPhee, an avid shad fisherman. In his otherwise excellent book *The Founding Fish*, he dedicates a whole chapter to the bent logic of catch-and-release fishing. Without the consummatory act of eating the fish, the thinking goes, you are merely torturing it, causing it pain for no reason other than your sadistic pleasure, making the act of fishing, as they say, a jerk on one end of the line waiting for a jerk on the other.

Darren Gygi

There is something nearly poetic about holding a wild creature for a moment, only to let it go (you can't do that with a bear). But it is true that no matter how conscientious a fisherman you are—how fast you are on the set to make sure fish don't swallow hooks, how gently you cradle them on the release—you are, at bottom, impaling fish in the mouth for fun. You can deny it if you prefer (I do, since I believe our capacity for self-deception is what separates us from the animals), but that's what's being done. That said, McPhee might go easier on the self-congratulation since I suspect if the fish got a vote, it'd much rather be returned to its friends and family with a lip piercing, than be basted in herb butter, covered in breadcrumbs, and served on a bed of risotto.

But what animal-rights types always miss in these debates is the fish themselves. They are not blameless. The reason I catch fish isn't that I'm such a smart guy. It's that I'm satisfying their own blood lust. Every time they rise to smite my Black Gnat or viciously hit my Clouser Minnow, they are committing an act of cold-blooded life-taking. Or at least they think they are. The fact that the gnat isn't real doesn't matter. When *Dateline NBC* does child predator stings, the gentlemen who walk through the door with six-packs of Mike's Hard Lemonade and love's pure light in their eye don't actually get to have relations with 12-year-olds, but they go to jail nonetheless.

I like to think I perform a similar function. I don't call myself a hero—that's for others to decide. Still, I can't help but feel I'm less an impaler of fish, than a valiant defender of the Black Gnat. I'm stopping those murderous bluegill, bloodthirsty bass, and homicidal trout before they kill again. Actually, I'm just letting them off with a warning in the hope of rehabilitating them. Perhaps they will learn from their mistakes, and take up more peaceable, civilized pastimes, such as eating phytoplankton, or catch-and-release fishing.

Matt Labash

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Wide World of Violence

While it is important that we address grave human rights violations perpetrated against Muslim women, Christina Hoff Sommers's "The Subjection of Islamic Women" (May 21) misses the point about global feminism and grassroots advocacy. While Sommers sings high praise for feminist Muslim women who are critical of their own cultures, she negates the work of feminists such as Eve Ensler and Katha Pollitt who, using the same methodology as the feminist Muslim women, call for an end to violence within their own culture and country, as well as in other parts of the world. Their work stems from a sound understanding that violence and discrimination against women and girls is universal and takes on different forms in different settings.

Sommers assumes that women are better off in the "developed" world; moreover, she asserts that the United States has something to teach women in other countries. In reality, the "developed" world can be a dangerous place for women: There is not one country in the world where women have not been raped or where they do not fear rape. In fact, every year in the United States hundreds of women are killed as a result of domestic violence. Contrasting the levels of violence in various countries does not help end violence. Within their respective spheres of journalism, activism, and the literary arts, Ensler and Pollitt have supported the grassroots efforts that are working for both the advancement and protection of women's rights overseas, as well as between our own shores.

Instead of unjustly criticizing Ensler, Pollitt, and underresourced women's groups, Sommers should help us address women's inequality wherever it is (which is everywhere) and ensure that women live a life free of violence in all corners of the world.

Taina Bien-Aimé
Executive Director, Equality Now
New York, N.Y.

Christina Hoff Sommers accuses me of indifference to the oppression of Muslim women and of equating such atrocities as acid attacks and stoning with U.S. evangelical promotion of abstinence-only education. In fact, I said no such thing. In the sentences Sommers quotes, my point was that, around the world, the rise of fundamentalist religion has been associated with attacks on women's equality. To note a common thread is hardly to place such phenomena on "the same plane."

As for my supposed indifference to Muslim women's human rights, I have written many, many pieces in the *Nation* and elsewhere about the horrific assaults on women's dignity, freedom, and lives carried out under the banner of Islam—including the case Sommers mentions of a Nigerian *sharia* court condemning a supposed "adulteress" to death by stoning.

Just two weeks ago I wrote about "honor" killing and other assaults on Iraqi women. So far as I know, my *New York Times Magazine* interview with members of RAWA, the Afghan feminist organization that made the Taliban execution video Sommers mentions, was the first in a mainstream publication. For over a decade, in my column and elsewhere, I have raised money and awareness for Muslim feminist and human-rights organizations, including RAWA, Baobab, OWFI, Women Living under Muslim Laws, and Women for Afghan Women, on whose board I sit—and for Equality Now, a group I have supported for years and which Sommers mentions approvingly.

I would be happy to compare my record of support for Muslim women's human rights with that of Sommers any day.

Katha Pollitt
New York, N.Y.

Christina Hoff Sommers responds: Taina Bien-Aimé argues that because rape and other forms of violence against women exist in all countries, including the United States, there is no point to comparing violence between American and other Western societies and Muslim societies. She evidently sees no difference between societies where such violence may be common, socially sanctioned, and even ceremonial and those where it is exceptional, the occasion of widespread revulsion, and severely

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punished. In these and many other respects, the condition of women in America is fundamentally different from that of women in countries like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Somalia, and Iran. Muslim women are not averting their eyes from these differences: They are emphasizing them, making them central to their campaigns for political and social reform. It is a pity that many American feminists are too confused or self-absorbed to help; Bien-Aimé's letter is another exhibit for my article's thesis.

Katha Pollitt is able to draw fine distinctions—as between a "common thread" and the "same plane"—but she is as intent as Bien-Aimé on throwing a veil over urgent moral distinctions. It is she, not I, who conjoins Muslim stonings and acid attacks with the proselytizing of U.S. evangelicals; this connection is made in the opening chapter of the book *Nothing Sacred*, whose introduction Pollitt wrote and whose subtitle, "Women Respond to Religious Fundamentalism and Terror," makes the same pithy point. And it is she who emphasizes the "common thread of misogyny that connects" the Taliban and the Christian Coalition. I am baffled that she is so defensive about a proposition that has been central to her writing for many years.

Pollitt concludes by citing her many philanthropies devoted to improving the lot of Muslim women. But what are these groups? One of them, RAWA, which stands for Revolutionary Women of Afghanistan, is described in *Nothing Sacred* as "a small Maoist organization." Another, OWFI—Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq—is described by its president (in a 2005 interview with the British *Workers' Liberty*) as part of a larger movement for "extending the agenda of worker-communism by reaching out to people who do not recognize themselves as worker-communists." Before emulating Pollitt's style of aiding Muslim women by supporting OWFI, one would want to know what that's all about.

I predict that Western liberalism and individualism, with all their flaws, will prove far more attractive to Muslim women than Maoism, worker-communism, anti-Americanism, or violence-is-everywhere obliviousness. And I am confident that they will prove far more effective in achieving the legal rights and social status that Muslim women are seeking. As the drama of Islamic feminism unfolds, I will be happy to compare the record of my predictions with those of Taina Bien-Aimé and Katha Pollitt any day.

Agnostics in Foxholes?

Jeffrey Bell's "What Falwell Wrought" (May 28) describes Clarence Darrow as the "atheist attorney" who humiliated three-time Democratic presidential hopeful William Jennings Bryan in the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925. Darrow, however, consistently stated that he was an agnostic during his lifetime and even wrote an essay titled "Why I Am an Agnostic."

Alex Yang
Statesboro, Ga.

Flighty Memorials

It's impossible to read Jonathan V. Last's "The Memorials We Deserve" (May 28) and keep a dry eye. Moreover, it is impossible not to wonder whether what the Flight 93 passengers did could have taken place on any plane but an American (or possibly an Israeli) one. When a Soviet pilot defected to the United States a number of years ago he was asked how he thought an American soldier differed from a Soviet soldier. He answered, "In the degree of responsibility he is allowed to take for his own actions." This example clarifies what many of us learn early in life about our American culture. We cannot continue to exist as a democracy unless we exercise individual responsibility. The heroes of Flight 93, leaderless strangers instantaneously united, took over the responsibility for their own lives, and for the salvation of their countrymen in Washington.

Nancy Ann Holtz
Beverly, Mass.

Virtual Visit

When I finished reading Matt Labash's "And the Band Plays On . . ." (March 26), I wanted to head straight for the Big Easy and meet each of the musicians and other people he described—even though I felt I already knew them. I am even trying to track down a copy of Rebirth Brass Band's *Live at the Maple Leaf* album just so I can hear "Blackbird Special." Labash painted a picture of New Orleans unlike any I have encountered. In my mind's eye, I could vividly see both the old, pre-Katrina town and the city of today striving for rebirth.

Joe Evancho
Traverse City, Mich.

Truer Than Fact

In his enjoyable review of David Crane's new biography of the great Antarctic explorer Robert Falcon Scott, James Bowman failed to mention the best book on Scott and his doomed return from the Pole in 1912 ("Death of a Hero," March 26). This was written not by any of Scott's biographers but by the witty English novelist Beryl Bainbridge whose 1991 historical novel, *The Birthday Boys*, captures the heroism and the mysteriousness of the man better than all the biographies put together.

Edward Short
New York, N.Y.

Executive Oversight

Regarding the May 21 Parody ("Harry Truman announces his candidacy for president—again"): I always appreciate a good parody, but I am honor-bound to protest two shocking omissions from the list of ex-presidents who later sought the presidency. How could you leave out the hallowed names of Martin Van Buren (Free Soil party, 1848) and Millard Fillmore (American party, 1856)?

John McClaughry
Concord, Vt.

• • •

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the weekly Standard

Dangerous Illusions

American foreign policy in the Middle East can produce severe cognitive dissonance. Take Palestine and Iran. The White House's evolving policies toward the Palestinians and the clerical regime in Tehran show how easy it is for history to take a back seat to process, for reality to give way to illusions, and for hope in diplomacy to obscure the need to make serious decisions. The difficulties in Iraq can be blamed for much of this: The administration has been reeling since 2005, first crippled by the hapless strategy and tactics of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and General John Abizaid, and now plagued by self-doubt about the war itself and the possibility of maintaining political support at home. Former Democratic senator Bob Kerrey, a member of the 9/11 Commission, made the case for the Iraq war simply and eloquently in the *Wall Street Journal*. Yet the new secretary of defense, Robert Gates, a member of the Iraq Study Group, increasingly reveals that he cannot argue for wars—the one in Iraq and the broader one against jihadism—that he does not appear to understand or believe in.

The administration is tired. Arguments for the war on terror and Iraq that once came easily (if seldom eloquently) are rarely heard now. So we are left to parse the administration's actions for thematic content. It's not a happy task. We'll take the depressing first, leaving Iran, which is with the possible exception of Sunni jihadism the greatest menace confronting the United States, for last.

The West Bank and Gaza are increasingly convulsed by civil strife—in Iraq such violence is sometimes called "civil war"—yet many people, in government and out, think that an Israeli-Palestinian deal is still possible, provided Washington has the will to force Jerusalem to make concessions. Yet the Islamic fundamentalist movement Hamas has grown powerful electorally and militarily by advancing an uncompromising hostility to the existence of Israel. Fatah, the backbone of the now-defunct Palestine Liberation Organization and the political base on which the Bush administration and the Europeans want to build a Palestinian state living in peace with its Jewish neighbor, has grown noticeably more anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic. Competition with Hamas, more popular and more religious, now defines Fatah's themes. Not just on the West Bank and in Gaza, but throughout the Sunni Muslim world, fundamentalism has eclipsed virtually every other rallying cry. Born in anger at the unstoppable bulldozer of the West's seductive and deracinating modernity, Islamic fundamentalism shows no signs of receding in Sunni lands, let alone in Palestine, where the faithful live right next to rich, technically accomplished, and militarily powerful Westerners.

Peace-processing has become an institution in Washington. Among many Democrats and Republicans, it's a reflex. Normally historically sensitive people will quickly affirm the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio to the spread of religious radicalism in the Islamic world and its now nervous offshoot, Europe. Yet the dynamic unfolding in Palestine—Islamic fundamentalism gobbling up the decaying corpse of secular dictatorship—is what we've seen almost everywhere in the Arab world. In Algeria, Syria, and Iraq, the process has been even more violent than in the West Bank and Gaza.

Israel is basically irrelevant to this ongoing collision of modernity and Islam. Still, it is entirely likely that a majority of Palestinians, perhaps a decisive majority, do not want to live peacefully next to a "Western, Jewish-colonial settler state." There is a reason Fatah has moved closer to Hamas ideologically. Religious Muslims, let alone fundamentalists, *loathe* the idea of a Western, Jewish state in what they see as the Muslim Middle East. As fundamentalism has gained strength in the region, the U.S.-backed dictators and their clientele—the Middle East's peace-processing establishment—have become an ever smaller minority among a more politically faithful majority who are deeply offended by the idea of Israel. What the Bush administration is now halfheartedly and wearily trying to do is restore the ancien régime *after* 1789.

Fortunately, with the Palestinians, the administration's search for a new policy can't be too detrimental to the United States. The Palestinians have enthusiastically rejoined the mad rush of modern Islamic history. They are no longer a separate, special people. The Palestinians are in the early stages of their "civil war," and it's impossible to know where it will finish—though one could make

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a decent guess that in these early rounds, Hamas will win and the illusion of a Palestinian partner for peace will end, even for the most committed Americans and Europeans.

What America can actually do in the Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio is now irrelevant. What is sad, however, and worrisome, is the extent to which the administration's actions reveal its philosophical crack-up. Where once the administration tried to understand the spread of Islamic radicalism (the president's vivid allusions to American support of autocracy in the Middle East were path-breaking), the administration is now defaulting to language and priorities typical of the decades that the president once criticized. The State Department, a profoundly conservative and cautious institution that, like all foreign ministries, exists to fortify government-to-government relations, has always been waiting to bring back the familiar, comparatively manageable world of Israeli-Fatah negotiations.

The White House, under fewer illusions, may simply want to maintain the appearance of peace-processing for the benefit of transatlantic ties. There is an argument for this, given the essential European role in imposing serious sanctions against an Iran that is pursuing nuclear weaponry. Just a little sop to keep the Palestinian-focused BBC and Bundestag happy. And the Europeans don't require much since the undeniable popular power of Hamas, its hard-to-conceal ugly ethics, and its blatant revulsion for Israel have severely tarnished the once romantic Palestinian cause.

But no more than a sop is justified. The sooner Washington gets beyond the peace process, the sooner both Democrats and Republicans can think more seriously about how to deal with rising Islamic radicalism in the Middle East and the threat it poses to the West. Returning to the pre-9/11 preference for stable Muslim autocracies and the peace process is a dangerous cul-de-sac.

The mess in Iraq has also allowed the idea of possibly productive negotiations with Iran's mullahs to take hold in Washington. However, only staunch doves and "realists" who are blind to the reality of power politics in the region can look optimistically upon the negotiations between the United States and Iran. We have a clerical regime that has aided and abetted virulently anti-American, radical Iraqi groups, exported to Iraq sophisticated automatic explosive devices designed to kill American and British soldiers, pushed forward defiantly its construction of uranium-enriching centrifuges, and kidnapped at least five American citizens in Iran, four of them Iranian-American dual-nationals. Utterly bogus espionage charges have been hurled at three, including Haleh Esfandiari, the director of the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center in Washington. Like her boss, former congressman Lee Hamilton, a chairman of the Iraq Study Group, Ms. Esfandiari has been an advocate of reconciliation between the United States and her homeland.

Note: The espionage charges were thrown at these Americans, who had absolutely nothing to do with U.S. intelligence and would have recoiled from any advocacy of "regime change," a day *after* the May 28 meeting between the Americans and Iranians in Baghdad. This isn't rocket science. We have a meeting, and the regime in Tehran wants to make crystal clear its contempt for any suggestion that the mullahs might want to build a bridge or two. The clerical regime hasn't been killing American and British soldiers in Iraq because they think it's counterproductive. They haven't been aiding radical Shiite groups because it's counterproductive. It looks increasingly likely that Iran has also aided Sunni insurgents—which the mullahs apparently don't think is counterproductive. The truth about Iran's revolutionary elite is that they have little regard for the Iraqi Shia, whom they blame for failing to rise against Saddam Hussein during the 1980-'88 Iran-Iraq war. Compromising the Iraqi Shia for the greater goal of hurting the United States and radicalizing the Iraqi Shiite community is undoubtedly seen in Tehran as a price worth paying.

An assumption of the Iraq Study Group was that the clerical regime wants stability next door in Iraq. Hence it might be willing to work with Americans. Yet Iran has benefited enormously from Iraqi instability. Traditional, moderate clerics like Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who have been willing to work with Americans, have been battered and bruised by the violence. The radical Moktada al-Sadr, a little-known and little-admired scion of a famous clerical family, skyrocketed to prominence because of the strife and thanks to critical Iranian aid to him. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and its more radical military wing, the Badr Organization, has also benefited enormously from the violence. SCIRI is a key Iraqi player that has received substantial assistance from Tehran. What is particularly regrettable about SCIRI is that the bloodletting has made life more difficult for moderates within the organization. And the violence has made it harder for SCIRI to pull away from Iranian patronage.

Does Iran want to stop this process? Iraq's Arab Sunni community—detested by the Iranians—has been routed from much of Baghdad, badly bloodied, and put to flight by the hundreds of thousands. This is a bad thing in the eyes of Tehran? Where does Iran have the most influence in Iraq? In Basra, where Shiite-versus-Shiite violence is at its worst. This is not a coincidence. Tehran has benefited massively from Iraqi Shiite division and internecine strife. What the United States should expect from Iran is that it will continue to ship its deadly explosives to Iraq and, through violence, feed the radicalization of the Shiite community. Success through Hezbollah in civil-war-torn Lebanon is the model to remember. Until now, it's been

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Iran's only successful foray abroad. "Stability" in Iraq means only one thing to Tehran: an American success.

It should be clear that the clerical regime now believes it can move rapidly forward with its nuclear program without much fear of American preventive military strikes. The once palpable fear of George W. Bush seems to have dissipated as America has floundered in Mesopotamia. Everyone can see that Washington, not Tehran, was more desirous of the recent meeting (NSC spokesmen clearly signaled that we wanted this meeting *because* U.S. troops were dying in Iraq). Even the most inept power politician in Tehran saw that America was weak and on the run. What once provoked anxiety (American troops in Iraq) now whets the appetite. The failure of the United States to respond more forcefully to Iranian arms shipments to Iraq has reinforced the message. Ditto the low-volume response to the kidnapping of American citizens in Iran.

The only good news here is that it will be difficult for the clerical regime to continue talks with the United States even though doing so is manifestly in its interest. When Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, recently said, "Those who imagine that the Islamic Republic of Iran will change its established, logical and defendable policy of forswearing negotiations and relations with the United States are seriously in error," he was being understated. It wouldn't be the first time that clerical Iran had refrained from doing what was in its best interests. But it probably wouldn't take much to tie America up in negotiations—or the hope of negotiations—with Iran over Iraq. And the more America is wedded to talks, the smaller the possibility that it will effectively counter Iran's nuclear-weapons program—the ultimate objective guiding the mullahs' foreign policy. What Tehran would surely like to do is convert its discussions with the European Union over its nuclear program from negotiations about stopping the enrichment of uranium to negotiations about managing an actual nuclear-weapons capacity. Iranians know the North Korean model well. It's a good one. Keep America talking on Iraq, and press ahead for the nuclear prize.

Does President Bush understand all this? Probably. Does his administration? The wish to disbelieve the obvious remains great, particularly as Iraq becomes more violent, which will happen this summer even if the surge is working. And although some might still want to put faith in the CIA's estimate that Iran will make a nuclear bomb in 10 years, it's a better bet that Iranians are significantly increasing centrifuge production because they have figured out how to make it work. Most likely, the time for diplomacy and sanctions is shrinking fast. Since the alternatives aren't easy—blockading Iranian oil exports through the Gulf or preventive military strikes—the Bush administration will be tempted to believe in the illusion of negotiations. We can raise the white flag, and call it victory.

—Reuel Marc Gerecht, for the Editors

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The New Old Thing

The return of the Iraq Study Group.

BY FREDERICK W. KAGAN

The Iraq Study Group is back. Even before the current strategy has had a chance to succeed or fail, some administration officials and platoons of congressmen are once again touting its report from last December as if it were a magic talisman that could save them from making tough decisions and fighting a tough war. It can't.

The ISG report remains seductive in its promise that we can avoid the burden of actually fighting to win in Iraq. Somehow, the report suggests (or is taken to suggest) we can manage to extricate ourselves more-or-less successfully from Iraq by reducing the American military presence and negotiating with Syria and Iran. Granted, the report is a little shopworn, as the situation in Iraq has changed substantially since its completion nearly six months ago. But the magnetism of a "bipartisan" report that offers a middle way between surge and abject defeat remains powerful, and even President Bush has begun singing (albeit in what seems a forced falsetto) its praises.

Of course, there were sensible suggestions in the report. And, in fact, of its 79 recommendations (which the authors, you will recall, insisted must be implemented all together and all at once), the administration has already adopted a sizable number. Several others are sound and should be implemented. A number have been overtaken by events. Many were unwise to begin with. And a handful made sense but were premature. A complete analysis of all 79 recommendations is available at *weeklystandard.com*. But when people talk about "implementing" the ISG report today, they mean two basic things: reducing the presence of U.S. troops and refocusing on training the Iraqi Security Forces rather than using American soldiers to establish security, and engaging Iran and Syria diplomatically.

The idea of returning to a focus on training rather than on establishing security is superficially appealing because it promises to reduce the exposure of American soldiers as well as their numbers. When the ISG Report first appeared, I pointed out a number of fundamental flaws in this approach. The Iraqi army and police would still be too small to handle the challenge they face, even if they were perfectly trained. During the time we would need to train and increase those forces to the necessary size and skill, rising sectarian violence would have destroyed them. And security forces inevitably drawn from all the sects and ethnicities of the country face an inherently challenging task in reducing ethnosectarian violence.

Nor is it at all clear that shifting back to this train-and-transition model, which was the centerpiece of the failed Abizaid-Casey strategy from late 2003 until January 2007, would reduce the exposure of those U.S. forces that remained. Pushing U.S. advisory teams into more Iraqi units while withdrawing the major U.S. combat forces to a few bases, or out of the country entirely, would put those teams at much greater risk than most American soldiers now face, both because the Iraqi units with which they embed are less skillful than U.S. units and because some of them are heavily infiltrated with sectarian actors. All of this was apparent in December 2006, which is why the president did not adopt this key ISG recommendation.

Since then, the situation has changed significantly. Sectarian violence has dropped considerably as a result of the changed strategy, but the importance of sectarian leaders in the Iraqi government and some units remains. Advisory teams are handicapped in rooting out such leaders because they must rely on the units they are embedded with for their understanding of the neighborhoods in which they operate.

Partnered units conducting their own counterinsurgency operations develop their own intelligence base, which allows them to know when Iraqi units are killing or capturing the wrong people. And partnered units have the power to stop bad actors within the Iraqi Security Forces from doing bad things, as advisory teams do not. Since dealing with bad sectarian actors, rather than providing basic training, has become the key challenge in handling the Iraqi army, a return to the Abizaid-Casey focus on train-and-transition now or probably any time in the next year or so would be a major mistake.

The other panacea the ISG offers is "engagement" with Iran and Syria. Again, this recommendation was problematic in December 2006 because it assumed that the basis of Iraq's problems was outside of Iraq and that regional negotiations were the key to preventing Iraqis from killing one another, neither of which was true. Today, a more fundamental problem has emerged even as the Bush administration has begun to negotiate with both Iran and Syria—and all the other key regional and international players. Successful diplomacy in situations like these requires trading less important inter-

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ests for more important ones, because we have no misunderstandings with Iran that can be cleared up by talking. The Iranians seek to defeat us in Iraq and to develop nuclear weapons. That's why they send weapons not only to Shia groups in Iraq, but to everyone—even Sunnis—who fight the Americans. That's why they refuse to allow a normal international inspections regime of a nuclear program they claim is peaceful. The mullahs are playing hardball. That doesn't mean we couldn't make a deal—but only if we were willing to give them something they want.

Should we? Should we give them control of southern Lebanon via their Hezbollah proxies in return for their quiescence in Iraq? Should we let them have nuclear weapons if they will stop funneling weapons to al Qaeda? And if we gave them those things, would they make the deal—or honor it? And supposing they did, how much would that lessen the violence in Iraq? The ISG offers no insight into this problem—simply the exhortation that talking would somehow solve it. That's not how diplomacy works, as James Baker should know very well. American vital interests categorically exclude allowing Iran to have nuclear weapons, allowing Iran to dominate Iraq, allowing Iran to destabilize Afghanistan, and allowing Iran to control southern Lebanon. Iranian interests, at least in the view of the mullahs who make the decisions, apparently require at least the first two of these things. That doesn't leave much to talk about.

The rush-to-the-exit frenzy that is responsible for the unthinking attempt to resuscitate the Iraq Study Group is both irresponsible and ridiculous. Let's give the new strategy a chance to work. At some point, success in Iraq will mean transitioning to an advisory role as security is established (although that role will look very different from what the ISG report imagined). But "adopting" the ISG report today won't get us there. It will only get us to defeat. ♦

Things to Like in the Immigration Bill

What conservatives are missing.

BY FRED BARNES

Conservatives are sometimes blind to what's in their own best interest. This is especially true on immigration, all the more so on the narrower matter of the bipartisan immigration reform bill now before the Senate. The bill gives conservatives a large chunk of what they've wanted for years, plus some things they don't want. The balance is heavily in their favor, though, and they're crazy to oppose this once-in-a-lifetime chance to stop illegal immigration and enact sensible policies for legal immigration.

At the top of the list of what conservatives can get is significantly beefed-up security along America's southern border. And that's just what's in the initial bill negotiated by Republican senator Jon Kyl and Democratic senator Ted Kennedy. Without blowing up the Kyl-Kennedy compromise, border enforcement can be further strengthened through amendments. Indeed, it was strengthened, in the first week of debate in May, with an amendment by Republican senator Judd Gregg that requires "demonstrated" operational control of the entire border with Mexico.

Then there's the "trigger," a brainstorm of Republican senator Johnny Isakson. It delays further reform—including issuance of Z visas allowing the estimated 12 million illegals in the United States to stay indefinitely—until *all* the steps to tighten border security have been taken.

Admittedly, Washington has a credibility problem on border security. Illegals have been sprinting across the border for decades, all but unimpeded. So it's understandable most Americans don't trust Washington to choke off the flow of illegals and cut it to an acceptable trickle. Here again, the bill can be improved, notably by adopting a suggestion of columnist Charles Krauthammer that success in securing the border be quantified—he suggested a 90 percent reduction in illegal immigration—before the trigger is activated.

Next is a temporary worker program. We desperately need one. There's a labor shortage in America and not only in agriculture. That's why businesses employ so many illegal immigrants in the first place. The Senate bill limits the program to 200,000 foreign workers a year, but that can and should be enlarged. And in a bow to conservatives, guest workers must return to their native country. There's no special path to citizenship for them, as there was in last year's Senate immigration bill.

Perhaps best of all, there's a reform that's been drastically undervalued by conservatives and everyone else: the end of chain migration. Currently, extended families of immigrants are given preference in entering America, and then the extended families of these extended families get priority, and so on. The chain goes on forever. This so-called "family unification" has meant we have practically no control over who comes in. Sixty percent or more of legal immigrants in recent years have arrived through this policy.

Also terminated in the Kyl-Kennedy legislation, thank heavens, is the "visa lottery" that lets 50,000 immigrants in annually, their names

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selected at random. Among those who have benefited was Hesham Mohamed Ali Hedayet, an Egyptian with a Muslim Brotherhood background whose wife won a green card in the lottery. In a 2002 terrorist attack, he opened fire on the line of passengers at the El Al ticket counter at Los Angeles International Airport, killing two people.

While nixing these misbegotten programs, the bill would limit immigrant families to husband, wife, and minor children. And merit—measured by education, skills, and job experience—would become a major factor in issuing visas. In short, we would admit those who meet America's needs, not those who happen to be distant nephews of an immigrant who arrived decades ago. Here, too, the bill may need tinkering to assure that the smartest and most needed—scientists, engineers, technicians, the Ph.D. crowd essentially—get in.

It would be wonderful if these four reforms—indisputably *conservative* reforms, loathed by liberals—could be packaged in a single bill that would sail through the Senate and House and be signed by the president. But the chances of that hover just above zero. Attaching two more provisions favored by many conservatives—a squeeze on illegal immigrants by denying them many government benefits and a requirement that local authorities notify immigration officials when they arrest or detain an illegal—would reduce that likelihood to absolute zero.

The reason is nearly every Democrat and a significant number of Republicans in Congress are opposed to such a one-sided bill. Fine, some conservatives think, let's cool our heels. Attitudes on immigration will change. Then we can take action. But this means waiting until Washington is ruled by Senate majority leader Jim DeMint, House speaker Tom Tancredo, and President Pat Buchanan. It means waiting forever.

At no time in the recent past could conservatives get what they crave on immigration and nothing more. And at no time in the foreseeable political future will they get only what they want, with no serious concessions or compromises, weakening amendments or offsetting liberal modifications. Republicans ran Congress and the White House from 2001 to this year and didn't come close to passing such immigration reforms. With Democrats now in charge, the prospects for purely conservative legislation are even more forbidding.

For conservatives, President Bush is part of the immigration problem. He opposes a tough crackdown on illegal immigrants. But so did the most conservative presidents of the twentieth century, so did Ronald Reagan, and, in all likelihood, so will the next president. On immigration, the White House is a lost cause for conservative restrictionists.

The default position of conservatives is to do nothing at all on immigration. It assumes that things could be worse, and indeed will be, if any conceivable legislation passes. But immigration is not like a weak economy that will revive sooner if government doesn't act. The immigration problem will only get worse absent reform. We have the example of the past several decades as proof.

Besides, is it the practice of conservatives to confront a huge national problem, then do nothing about it? I don't think so. Rather, that's the liberal custom on issues like entitlements, racial preferences, and crime. That's why liberals, not conservatives, have become today's reactionaries.

Nevertheless, many conservatives rejected the Kyl-Kennedy bill instantly, emphatically, and largely for one reason. They insist it's an amnesty bill, and they're right. It *is* an amnesty bill of sorts. The vast majority of folks living in America unlawfully wouldn't be arrested, prosecuted, or deported. On the other hand, they wouldn't be automatically eligible for citizenship either. But the bar for staying permanently with a Z visa—the trigger sunsets an initial probationary Z visa—would be set quite low. The criteria (learn English, pay a fine, stay out of jail) would be easy to meet. In effect, illegal immigrants would become privileged buttinskis, permitted to stay in the United States while others wait in the legal immigration line.

It's entirely understandable that conservatives are upset by this. And their skepticism about the bill's promise to deport illegal immigrants who don't qualify for Z visas and to force temporary foreign workers to go home is well-founded. Here once again, the bill can be improved by an amendment mandating expedited deportation of those without Z visas. The bill now requires only that deportation proceedings commence immediately.

Conservatives haven't sufficiently taken into account the other side of the bargain. The Kyl-Kennedy legislation—Kyl modestly thinks the bill ultimately won't be named after him—is a compromise. It's not ideal from anyone's perspective. Compromises never are. So Kyl-Kennedy is a deal in which both sides get something and give up something. It must be judged by how the tradeoffs balance out.

In negotiations with Kennedy, Kyl got the four major reforms favored by conservatives: border buildup, the trigger, temporary workers, and an end to chain migration. Kennedy got the Z visas to legalize 12 million people who've broken the law. The Z visas may be the single biggest accomplishment. But, cumulatively, what Kyl achieved amounts to much more. He—and conservatives—got the better deal.

Look at it this way. Kennedy's triumph is in allowing 12 million illegal immigrants to stay here indefinitely and pursue citizenship (only if they're ready to return to their home country). But it's not as if these people were going to be tossed out of the country otherwise. Even conservatives unhappy with the bill surely recognize this. The 12 million are here to stay, legally or illegally.

Remember: Without a compromise, there would be no opportunity at all to reform the badly broken immigration system. There would be no sweeping conservative reforms in

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play. And the 12 million would still be here.

Conservatives have nightmares about repeating the immigration reform experience of 1986. The immigration bill that year targeted employers who violated the ban on hiring illegal laborers. But enforcement never happened. Employers had an alibi: They were fooled by fake IDs. Today there are tamper-proof biometric IDs, leaving employers with no excuse for hiring an immigrant without one. And officials have no excuse for not enforcing the law.

Last week, President Bush infuriated conservatives who oppose the immigration compromise by accusing them of nitpicking. He was wrong about this. Nitpicking is exactly what's good for a bill that's 380 pages long and written in dense legislative language. The time to expose flaws and correct them is before a bill becomes law.

There's a role for Bush in the immigration debate, but attacking opponents isn't it. Instead, the president should vow to enforce immigration laws vigorously this time and prepare the federal bureaucracy to carry out reform measures that may be enacted. It will take much reassurance to persuade the public that Washington really means it this time on immigration.

A final point: Conservatives shouldn't be turned off by the presence of Kennedy as the Democratic collaborator on immigration. "Ted wants a bill," Kyl says. Faced with reaching agreement with one of the four horsemen of partisanship—Democratic senators Harry Reid, Chuck Schumer, Dick Durbin, or Pat Leahy—Kyl can be forgiven for looking elsewhere. Those guys want an issue with which to bludgeon Republicans, not a bill.

Every now and then, an issue comes along that causes politicians and their followers to lose their sense of proportion. That's what the war in Iraq has done to liberals and Democrats. My fear is immigration is having that effect on many conservatives. It doesn't have to, though, and it won't, if conservatives take a fresh look at the immigration reform bill and realize where their true interest lies. ♦

The Nervous Caucus

Republican senators and the war.

BY MATTHEW CONTINETTI

Is the number of Senate Republican defectors from President Bush's Iraq strategy about to rise? Probably, but not in a way that would bring an end to the war anytime soon.

The recent public comments of two senators who have been stalwart allies of the president caused murmuring in Republican circles that Bush's congressional support is about to erode. On May 25, hours after Congress sent a war funding bill without a timeline for withdrawal to Bush's desk, Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell said in a press conference that "the handwriting is on the wall that we are going in a different direction in the fall, and I expect the president to lead it. . . . I think we are looking for a new direction in the fall."

Then, less than 48 hours after McConnell's remarks, Alabama senator Jeff Sessions told CBS News, "By September, when General Petraeus is to make a report, I think most of the people in Congress believe, unless something extraordinary occurs, that we should be on a move to draw those surge numbers down." A top GOP senator told me last week he estimates up to a third of the 49 Senate Republicans are nervous about developments in Iraq and may move from Bush's position come fall. Meanwhile, an "influential Republican strategist" told *National Review Online* that up to *half* of the Republican Senate caucus could vote against Bush on future war appropriations if there are no improvements in Iraq by September.

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That's when Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of Multi-National Force–Iraq, plans to return to Washington and update Congress and the American public on the conduct of the war. The timing of the September report is somewhat arbitrary. According to Coalition sources, it was in January that Petraeus decided on late summer or early fall as the best time to assess the new strategy, the foremost goal of which is the security of the Iraqi people. The assessment will be comprehensive, examining Iraqi security, governance, economics, and the rule of law. It will be done in cooperation with the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and Ambassador Ryan Crocker. It will sketch various potential courses of action and speculate on the likely consequences of each. But any decision on which course to follow will be made by policymakers in Washington.

Petraeus, Crocker, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates discussed the idea when the secretary visited Iraq in mid-April. Gates was receptive. The following week Petraeus visited Washington, where Congress was in the midst of passing a supplemental appropriations bill for Iraq that included a timetable for American withdrawal. During a press conference at the Pentagon, Petraeus mentioned the decision to report on the war's progress in September. The media and political class immediately seized on September as a turning point. Republicans kept telling everyone to give the surge "till September." They never said what would happen afterward.

That's probably because no one knows what will happen. Chances

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are, if the level of violence in Iraq has not been reduced by the time Petraeus makes his report, more Republicans will jump ship. A member of the Senate Republican leadership says the GOP caucus is uniformly disappointed with the inability of the Iraqis to pass legislation that could lead to political reconciliation. Congress included language in its latest Iraq appropriations bill that would penalize the Iraqis if they do not meet certain "benchmarks," while also giving Bush the power to waive those penalties. The author of the benchmark language was Virginia Republican John Warner, the ranking member of the Armed Services Committee who is considering a move away from the president. Warner is up for reelection next year.

This week Tennessee Republican Lamar Alexander plans to introduce legislation concerning the Iraq Study Group (ISG). The ISG report proposed that the United States transition from a combat to an advisory role in Iraq, embedding American soldiers with Iraqi units and concentrating on force protection and counterterrorism while drawing down U.S. forces. The goals: reducing the American "footprint" in Iraq, training the Iraqi army, and negotiating with Iran and Syria. When ISG authors James Baker and Lee Hamilton presented their report last December, Bush rejected their findings in favor of surging troops to Baghdad and adopting Gen. Petraeus's counterinsurgency strategy.

Alexander's legislation would make the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group official U.S. policy. What that means is unclear. Alexander and his cosponsors—three other Republicans and four Democrats—unveiled their plan only recently. The idea has been germinating since Bush's rejection of the ISG. That decision surprised Alexander, who brought the subject up with Bush during a February meeting. In March, Alexander delivered a statement on the Senate floor saying he was disappointed that Bush hadn't taken the study group more seriously. Its recommendations, Alexander said, offered the best long-term, bipartisan strategy for American engagement in Iraq.

Alexander and Mark Pryor, the Arkansas Democrat, discussed the issue, but nothing else happened. It was Colorado Democrat Ken Salazar who approached Alexander with the idea of writing a bill that would enshrine the ISG approach in law. Alexander and Salazar have enjoyed working with each other in the past and decided to go for it.

Alexander approached Utah Republican Bob Bennett, a close adviser to minority leader McConnell. Salazar brought on board Democrats Bob Casey of Pennsylvania and Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas. Meanwhile, Alexander persuaded New Hampshire Republican Judd Gregg, another close adviser to McConnell who also has personal ties to President Bush, to add his name as cosponsor. Finally, New Hampshire Republican John Sununu heard of the discussions and asked to have his name added to the list. Both Alexander and Sununu are up for reelection in 2008.

McConnell, who is also up for reelection next year, seems receptive. Even Bush had some kind things to say about the ISG in a recent press conference. Yet Senate majority leader Harry Reid, the Nevada Democrat, has given no indication that the Senate will debate Alexander's legislation. The bill's provisions don't have to stand alone, however. They can be added as amendments to other legislation—and in the months ahead there will be plenty of legislation dealing with Iraq and Afghanistan.

That's because the debate over the war is largely a Kabuki play performed for the Democrats' political benefit. Now some Republicans want a cameo role. Last month's showdown between Bush and Congress over Iraq spending demonstrated that the president's congressional critics are mostly talk. Democrats could not muster the votes necessary to overturn Bush's veto and legislate war policy. Meanwhile, they are unwilling to take the blame if money for the war runs out while U.S. troops are in combat. As the 2008 election approaches, they will be even less willing. So Bush's critics hem and haw, enjoying public support and media accolades while knowing their rhetoric will have little to no effect on the conduct of the war. Democratic senators have told Reid that any week they spend *not* talking about Iraq is a bad week. There have been dozens of Iraq votes in the first five months of the 110th Congress. And Reid plans to reignite the Iraq debate every six weeks, regardless of the circumstances.

The Republicans are torn between supporting the war effort and what they see as saving their own skins. They want to make the 2008 elections a referendum on the Democratic Congress's fiscal and social policies, while the Democrats want to have another election on Bush and Iraq. Republicans facing difficult reelections probably will defect from Bush on Iraq in a desperate attempt to change the subject, knowing their criticism is just as inconsequential as the Democrats'. Bush's GOP critics already include Nebraska's Chuck Hagel, Oregon's Gordon Smith, Minnesota's Norm Coleman, Ohio's George Voinovich, and Maine's Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe. Kansas's Sam Brownback was open to the surge before he was against it.

The most prominent Senate hawk is John McCain, but his presidential campaign often takes him away from Washington. That leaves most of the pro-war lobbying to McCain's fellow Arizonan Jon Kyl, who is number three in the minority leadership, and South Carolina's Lindsey Graham. Oklahoma's Tom Coburn is also important. In February, Coburn was among the 10 Republican senators who voted against confirming Gen. George Casey, Petraeus's predecessor, as Army chief of staff.

Among the ten anti-Casey Republicans was Missouri's Kit Bond, the ranking member of the Senate Intelligence Committee whose son is serving in Iraq. Bond's colleagues say he

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is a key player in fostering Republican support for the president's policy. Bond is no blind follower of the president, however. He is critical of the administration's decision to reject the original chief of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Jay Garner, in favor of Paul Bremer. He is critical of the scandal-plagued Iraqi police. And he shares in others' frustrations with the Iraqi political class.

Yet he also says the new war strategy is showing results. In early May, Bond visited Iraq with Republican senators Saxby Chambliss of Georgia and Olympia Snowe of Maine and California GOP congressman Darrell Issa. One day the group drove into downtown Ramadi in a Cougar Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle. Not long ago in Ramadi, al Qaeda ruled. When Bond visited, the place was—relatively speaking—quiet. Bond, his colleagues, and Maj. Gen. W.E. Gaskin—the commander of Multi-National-Force–West—along with two U.S. Marines carrying M16s, took in the old city college and visited Marines. They stood at Firecracker Corner, so called because of all the firefights that have taken place there. They saw a mosque that American soldiers had rebuilt.

Bond was amazed. To him, the progress was palpable. Months ago, a visit to Ramadi was unthinkable. But the Sunni sheikhs who dominate Anbar politics had turned against al Qaeda in Iraq and joined forces with the Americans. Things were changing.

When the group returned to America, Bond did everything he could to get the word out to his fellow GOP senators. It wasn't enough. Snowe issued her own press release, written before the visit to Ramadi. "So far, this trip certainly underscores the fact that there is not a military solution to the problem," she said. Snowe never issued a release about what she saw in Ramadi and elsewhere in Anbar province. Her silence underscores lesson number one in the debate over the war: When American politicians look at Iraq, they see what they want to see. ♦

Putin's Oily Politics

Energy in the executive, Kremlin-style.

BY IRWIN M. STELZER

What do Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Mikhail Gutseriev, and John Browne have in common? They all thought their desire for profits from Russia's vast oil reserves trumped Vladimir Putin's lust for power. Khodorkovsky now languishes in a Siberian jail. When his sentence is served, he will be rearrested and charged with crimes that will get him another 28 years in a prison from which he is unlikely ever to emerge. Gutseriev, head of mid-sized oil company RussNeft, was recently charged with "large-scale tax evasion" and conducting illegal activities as part of an "organized group," the same charges laid against Khodorkovsky. It seems that Kremlin deputy chief of staff Igor Sechin, the onetime KGB agent who heads state-owned Rosneft, which took over Khodorkovsky's Yukos oil company, "is extremely ambitious in regard to [RussNeft's] assets," according to press reports.

Which brings us to Lord Browne, the recently retired chief of British Petroleum who also thought there was money to be made in Russian oil. He set up TNK-BP, a joint oil and gas venture with a group of Russian billionaires. It is Russia's fourth largest oil company, accounts for about 25 percent of BP's global production, and is developing the huge Kovykta gas field in eastern Siberia. Or not. Oleg Mitvol, deputy head of Russia's Federal Resource Management Agency, and the man who magically acquired Boris Berezovsky's newspaper assets when that "oligarch" decided that residence and asylum in Britain would contribute more to his longevity than would continued residence in Russia, has decided that TNK-BP is in violation of its license to develop the Kovykta field. It seems that TNK-BP is not producing the quantities specified in its contract because—get this—it can't get a permit from the Russian government to export Kovykta's gas to China; that market is now reserved for Gazprom.

This ratchets up the pressure on the three billionaire partners of BP in the joint venture to sell out to state-controlled Gazprom—several former KGB agents grace its board—especially after an appeals court in the east Siberian city of Irkutsk ruled last week that "it is out of our jurisdiction to review the submitted documents." A banker familiar with the matter told the *Financial Times*, "This is just going to be a phone call. If they are told to sell, they will sell." Which might be soon: Late last week the Natural Resources Ministry postponed a final decision because of the "complexity of the issue," which means the government is deciding on the precise form of the inevitable takeover.

Browne was not alone in planning a strategy around Russian resources. Royal Dutch Shell was induced to cede control of its $22 billion Sakhalin-2 natural gas project to Gazprom after environmental authorities—namely Oleg Mitvol, now the scourge of TNK-BP—threatened to levy a $30 billion fine and even close down the project. Control goes to Gazprom, and a special dividend of about $1 billion per year goes to Russia's treasury.

One way or another, the state's share

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of Russian oil production has risen from about 28 percent to more than 50 percent—and that does not include the TNK-BP assets, ticketed for state control. Control of gas production now also rests with the state. Russia rakes in $600 million every day from the sale of its oil and gas, most of it from sales to the European Union. Half of the E.U.'s gas imports come from Russia, with newer members Hungary and the Czech Republic just about completely dependent on Russian gas.

Worse still, Russia has successfully gained control of the pipeline networks that deliver fuel to the West. Last month, Putin persuaded the presidents of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to send their gas through a pipeline being built along the Caspian Sea coast en route to Western markets via Russian and Russian-controlled territories. It seems like only yesterday that I was briefed at the State Department on plans to build a new pipeline under the Caspian Sea that would hook up with existing lines through the Caucasus and Turkey, bringing Central Asian gas to Europe without passing through a Russian bottleneck. Those plans are now all but dead.

Putin is still taking no chances that the United States and the E.U. might revive that plan. So Gazprom has bought a significant stake in the Central European Gas Hub (CEGH) from an Austrian energy group, OMV, that operates gas storage facilities in Baumgarten, close to the Hungarian border. Any gas that bypasses Russian territory would pass through that hub en route from the Caspian area and the Middle East. The memorandum of understanding between Gazprom and OMV quite correctly describes the facility that has fallen under Russian control as "the most important gas hub in continental Europe."

Putin also recently approved plans by Transneft to build an oil pipeline to the Baltic port of Primorsk, bypassing Belarus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

Russia's president has managed, brilliantly it must be conceded, to use his nation's oil and gas resources in a way that his predecessors never managed to use the Red Army—to gain huge influence in Western Europe. "If power is measured by the fear instilled in others—as many Russians believe—[Putin] is certainly winning," observes the *Economist*.

None of this would matter if we were dealing with ordinary commercial transactions, aimed at maximizing the value of Russia's natural endowments. But that is not the case. When Sergei Kuprianov, press spokesman for Gazprom, described its natural gas operations as "normal business," former British ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray commented, "Normal business is the last thing Gazprom is involved in."

First, Gazprom is an important weapon in Putin's program of eliminating dissenting voices in Russian media. Gazprom Media took over what had been the country's only independent television channel after Putin closed it down. The company also bought two of Russia's large and once-independent newspapers, and Alisher Usmanov, chairman of Gazprominvest Holdings, the company's financial arm, bought the remaining one—after which the editor was fired and the defense correspondent had a fatal fall from a third-story window. Gazprom's control of the media is so complete that Ambassador Murray reports, "The era of free speech . . . is now over."

Second, the takeovers of Shell, BP, and other assets hardly represent transactions at market prices between willing parties. Putin takes his instruction from Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* rather than Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and makes potential sellers offers they can't refuse: my price or nothing if you are a foreign corporation with billions already sunk in Siberia, and my offer or a long visit with Khodorkovsky if you are within my reach.

Third, Putin's goal is not profit maximization. It is to gain substantial influence over the foreign policies of European countries and the United States. He has already shown that he is willing to cut off gas supplies to Europe, and he cooperates with OPEC to damage the American economy by keeping oil prices at cartel-set levels. Cruise missiles and a nuclear umbrella might have prevented the Red Army from rolling across Europe, but they are no match for supply cutoffs that can throw Western economies into recession and freeze consumers.

Consider just one example. Russia wanted to buy Lithuania's Mazeikiai oil refinery, but the former Soviet prisoner-state decided to sell to a Polish group. So Russia closed the pipeline to that refinery, allegedly for maintenance—which has been going on for a year and promises to continue indefinitely. If Russia sought to reassert control over its former satellite, would NATO countries risk a cutoff in their vital fuel supplies by opposing that move? Don't bet on it.

Russia has achieved this dominant position for two reasons. The first is that the world's capitalists behave as Lenin knew they would: "They will furnish credits . . . supply us materials and technical equipment which we lack, . . . restore our military industry for our future attacks against our suppliers." (That is not as memorable as the usual paraphrase—"The capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them"—but then Lenin wasn't given to pithy prose.) The Russian state was able to take control of Gazprom only because Western banks saw fit to lend over $7 billion, collecting appropriate fees. The gaggle of investment bankers, lawyers, and lobbyists in London, New York, and Washington who represent Russia in its financial transactions constitute a lobby of "useful idiots," to borrow again from Lenin, ready to speak up on behalf of the international thuggery that has become Putin's signature operation.

The West has supplied Russia with the technical skills needed to exploit oil and gas resources in largely inaccessible areas, poured capital into Russian-controlled companies, and sold important bits of Western energy structure to Gazprom, which aims to be "the biggest energy company in the world," according to Dmitry Medvedev, the company's chairman and, not incidentally, the first deputy prime minister of the Russian Federation. Never mind

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that Russia will not allow such foreign investment in its infrastructure, or that it is using the proceeds of its oil and gas wealth to beef up its obsolete military. "Our military is the second-most-powerful force in the world after America's," a key Russian official trumpeted on the eve of the E.U.-Russian summit in mid-May.

The second reason Russia has gained such a dominant hand in all of its negotiations with energy-dependent countries—it has, for example, refused to discuss reducing the $400 million it charges Europe's commercial airlines to overfly Siberia—is the inability of the West to forge a common strategy. "It is not a sustainable system—the Germans siding more with the Russians than with their own E.U. partners," says Katinka Barysch, an analyst with the Centre for European Reform.

The ingredients of such a Western strategic response are obvious: Increase storage facilities as insurance against gas-supply interruptions; finance (subsidize if necessary) pipelines that avoid Russian-controlled territories; refuse to sell infrastructure facilities to Gazprom; reduce the monopoly profits of E.U. distributors by liberalizing domestic markets; remove impediments to the construction of terminals that would receive liquefied natural gas from Africa and the Middle East; and unite to create countervailing buyer power, rather than deal individually with Russia.

Tony Blair is surely right that "energy policy is creating . . . new tensions in international relations." Russia is "prepared to use [its] energy resources as an instrument of policy." But the West is unprepared to use its financial and technical resources in the same way. German chancellor Angela Merkel, who grew up in East Germany when Putin was a KGB officer there, has had some harsh words for Putin, but what really counts is that a German group is providing 49 percent of the financing of a $9 billion project to increase Germany's reliance on Russia even more. It is no coincidence, as the left was wont to say, that Gerhard Schröder arranged this deal while chancellor, and immediately upon losing to Merkel was hired by the venture to serve as its chairman at what is said to be a handsome salary, indeed.

Failure to look ahead and resist the comforting warmth of the Russian bear hug, warns Britain's outgoing prime minister as he heads off into the sunset, "could be as crucial to our country's [and, the West's] future as defense." No one is listening. ♦

The Islamists Are Coming!

And they've got their lawyers with them.

BY DEAN BARNETT

Boston

Bill Sapers doesn't much look like the kind of guy who would find himself staring down radical Islamists or their friends. A 79-year-old accountant, approximately five-foot-six, bespectacled and soft-spoken, Sapers personifies the "distinguished gentleman." But the Islamic Society of Boston, after vainly tussling with him in court for roughly 18 months, would probably dispute that characterization.

Until the Islamic Society of Boston (ISB) sued Sapers in late 2005 and gave him a small and unwanted measure of fame, he was far from a public figure. Until then, Sapers had been an anonymous businessman who busied himself with civic activities in his spare time; he has worked with the Anti-Defamation League and is a member of the foundation for Boston's Roxbury Community College.

It was in the course of his duties for the college that Sapers's path crossed that of the ISB. At a meeting of the board in 2002, a fellow board member reported a coup: "Saudi Arabia was going to build the college a garage," Sapers recalls. Sapers asked exactly what this meant, and was told that the college had been the beneficiary of a deal between the city of Boston and the ISB.

It turned out the board member had mangled some details (a garage was never part of the equation), but the deal was still an intriguing one. When Sapers first heard of it, the city had sold the Islamic Society of Boston a piece of land adjacent to Roxbury Community College at a cut-rate price. Depending on who you ask, the land had been conveyed for somewhere between 10 percent and 40 percent of its appraised value. On the plot, the ISB was going to build a $22 million mosque with a 125-foot minaret and a 75-foot dome. In exchange for the city's largesse, the ISB would provide nebulously defined services to Roxbury Community College, including an educational lecture series, and nebulously defined services to the city, including maintenance of a nearby public park.

This arrangement aroused Sapers's curiosity, and he started looking into the ISB. A cursory inspection of the organization's IRS records showed that one of the ISB's seven trustees in the late 1990s was a cleric whose name Sapers knew from his work with the Anti-Defamation League: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a notorious radical.

Although academic apologists for Islamists strangely praise al-Qaradawi as a moderate, he is a well-known figure in the global jihad who has famously vowed that Islam will conquer both Europe and the United States. According to Lebanese-born terror expert Walid Phares, "al-Qaradawi produced most of the doctrinal foundations for Jihadi radicalism since the mid-1990s,

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including the incitement for Jihadists to defeat the Africans in southern Sudan, the Middle East minorities, and women's movements. Al-Qaradawi [calls for the] further Talibanization of the Muslim world."

Sapers kept digging. He contacted famed terror expert Steve Emerson, who, as it turned out, had long been documenting the ISB's ties with supporters and enablers of extremism. Shortly thereafter, Charles Jacobs, another Boston resident, warmed to the scent as well. Jacobs is perhaps America's foremost activist in the fight against the human slave trade and the head of the David Project, an organization dedicated to honest reporting on the Middle East.

In 2003, this crew reached out to local media outlets. That October, the *Boston Herald* began publishing a withering series of articles documenting the ISB's unsavory ties. Challenged about al-Qaradawi, the ISB denied he'd been a trustee and explained his listing on the IRS forms as a clerical oversight. But then it emerged that the ISB had used a taped appearance by al-Qaradawi (by this time barred from entering the United States) as a fundraising tool in 2002.

There was more. The *Herald* and Fox 25, Boston's local Fox affiliate, reported on the writings of ISB trustee Walid Fitaihi, who had been one of the signatories to the city's generous land transfer. Fitaihi had decried Jews as the "murderers of prophets" and claimed that Jews "would be punished for their oppression, murder and rape of the worshippers of Allah." Fitaihi also declared his scorn for the "Zionist lobby in America . . . which has recruited many of the influential media."

Unfortunately for Sapers and Jacobs, their efforts to arouse the interest of influential media outlets met with mixed results. While the *Herald* and Fox 25 reported the story aggressively, the *Boston Globe*—with the conspicuous exception of conservative op-ed columnist Jeff Jacoby—largely ignored it, as did the other local network affiliates.

Equally unconcerned were the city of Boston and the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA). The BRA was the city authority that had made the land deal with the ISB, yet refused to answer direct questions about it. The David Project has sued the BRA to get a gander at the public documents related to that conveyance.

In late 2005, the ISB sued Sapers, Jacobs, the *Herald*, Emerson, Fox 25, and all the reporters who had covered the story for tortious defamation. The inclusion of Jacobs, Emerson, and Sapers was especially curious, since all these men had done was talk to reporters. The free speech issues at stake were sufficiently grave that renowned First Amendment lawyer Floyd Abrams agreed to represent Emerson. Attorney Jeff Robbins of the prominent Boston law firm Mintz Levin represented Jacobs and the David Project on a pro-bono basis.

Jacobs points out that the purpose of lawsuits like this (and the one brought on behalf of the Minneapolis airport's "flying imams") is to chill criticism of Islamic groups, even the airing of accurate information. Certainly, any media outlet that reports on the Islamic Society of Boston has to know that a lawsuit may well be its reward for reporting that displeases the ISB. Perhaps that explains why the *Boston Globe* showed little interest in the story, and, when it did cover it, seemed to bend over backwards to avoid offending the ISB or its attorneys.

As for the defendants in the case, they refused to be intimidated. The suit's transparently frivolous nature emboldened them.

The linchpin of the ISB's complaint was that all of the defendants had been negligent in relying on Steve Emerson as a terror expert. To support this notion, the suit quoted a 1991 *New York Times* article that disparaged Emerson. Lest this 16-year-old newspaper piece not be deemed dispositive, the complaint also cited a 1998 article from something called the *Weekly Planet* that said, "Emerson has no credibility left. He can't get on TV and most publications won't pick him up." In the 12 months preceding the ISB's lawsuit, Emerson had appeared on

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MSNBC 65 times, Fox News 78 times, and NBC 16 times including multiple appearances on the *Today Show* and the *Nightly News*.

But even if you're bound to win, being sued is taxing. Boston city councilor Jerry McDermott, who aggressively pursued the unusual land conveyance to the ISB, was threatened with a lawsuit and received menacing phone calls at home, where he lives with his wife and two young daughters.

As for near-octogenarian Bill Sapers, he declared himself "too dumb to be scared." Apparently recognizing the hopelessness of intimidating Sapers, Emerson, Jacobs, and the media outlets who were fighting its lawsuit, the ISB finally backed down, though not before securing a face-saving concession: A second lawsuit was also dropped last week, the appeal of a previously dismissed case in which a citizen had disputed the BRA's conveyance to the ISB. This allowed the ISB, however implausibly, to declare victory, even as it swallowed its supposed outrage over being defamed.

But Sapers is declaring victory, too, saying, "This case was about our attempt to bring the truth to the table and their attempt to silence us." The latter attempt failed. Still, thanks to the media's and government's indifference, the defendants' vindication rings a bit hollow. The *Boston Globe*'s coverage of last week's developments failed to mention the ISB's ties to extremists like Qaradawi. And the City of Boston, through the BRA, continues to stonewall efforts to determine exactly how the land transfer to the ISB came about. The David Project's lawsuit against the BRA seeking access to records that should be public labors on; the BRA remains less than forthcoming. Meanwhile, construction on the new mosque is far advanced.

You have to wonder: If people like Sapers, Jacobs, and Emerson are our modern Paul Reveres sounding an alarm that needs to be heard, can they be successful if our most prominent media outlets and even our government ignore them? ♦

Who's Cherry Picking Now?

A less than useful report from the Senate Intelligence Committee

BY GARY SCHMITT

After months of internal wrangling, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released its latest report on prewar intelligence on Iraq. This new report covers assessments of what we should have expected, both inside and outside of Iraq, once Saddam was removed from power. To call the committee's effort mediocre would be an injustice to mediocrity everywhere.

The report pales in comparison with the committee's first review of prewar intelligence, completed in July 2004, which examined why U.S. intelligence was so far off the mark on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. That report reflected a serious investigative effort, with a body of analysis that provided a road map of sorts for improving intelligence in the future. Other than scoring political points for the new Democratic Senate majority against the administration, the new report offers few if any real lessons.

Although it is 226 pages long, the new report consists mainly of a simple reprint of two key documents, along with their lengthy internal distribution lists. They are "Regional Consequences of Regime Change in Iraq" and "Principal Challenges in Post-Saddam Iraq," both issued in January 2003 by the National Intelligence Council, the intelligence community's college of analytic cardinals. The Intelligence Committee's own "conclusions" run to just seven pages and amount to little more than snippets from the two NIC documents.

The real conclusion—implicit in the who's who of administration officials on the distribution list and made explicit in the "additional views" set out by Chairman Jay Rockefeller and three other Democratic senators—is that if only senior policymakers had listened to the "cautionary judgments" of the intelligence community before the war, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in today. By ignoring those predictions, "the Bush Administration once again demonstrated its practice of cherry-picking intelligence reports and assessments that supported policy objectives and denigrating or dismissing those which did not." Along with "other missteps," this practice, they conclude, has produced "increased violence in Iraq, a resurgent al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan, and a worsening spread of anti-American extremism around the world."

Truth be told, the committee's majority does a bit of cherry-picking of its own. The two NIC documents, which in theory reflected a consensus view across the intelligence community, are a mix of mostly conventional analysis of Iraq and the region. Based not on hard intelligence but on in-house regional expertise, the documents, as one might expect from a largely speculative effort, got some things right and others not.

Moreover, the NIC analysts recognized that developments in Iraq would greatly depend on what the United States and the Coalition actually did there after they overthrew Saddam. Decisions made in Washington, the NIC noted, would have a "dominant influence" on how things turned out. Ignoring this in its conclusions, the Intelligence Committee straight-lines it from the NIC's discussion of pos-

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sible problems to today's situation—as if the botched occupation of Iraq had never happened.

What the committee highlights from the two reports is its cautions: that establishing a democracy in Iraq would be a hard slog; that the region would be in turmoil and the example of Iraq would do little or nothing to promote reforms elsewhere or to slow WMD programs in other countries; that al Qaeda would use the war to accelerate its terrorist activities and, while we were distracted, reestablish itself in Afghanistan; that a deeply divided Iraqi society would engage in sectarian violence, with Shia reprisal killings likely; and that rogue ex-regime elements could forge an alliance with terrorist organizations or independently engage in guerrilla warfare against Coalition forces or the new Iraqi government.

Certainly, it is true that establishing democracy in Iraq will take time. That said, it actually hasn't been the case that Iraqis have spurned democracy. Given how beaten down civil society and politics were by the Baathist regime, and how extreme the security problems facing Iraqis since Saddam's removal have been, the democratic process has been surprisingly resilient. There has been little or no "backsliding into Iraq's tradition of authoritarianism," as the NIC suggested might happen.

As for the region, the NIC analysis is not exactly what the committee has put forward. First, on the regional implications of Saddam's removal, the NIC starts by predicting an immediately inflamed "Arab street"; it asserts that a long-term occupation of Iraq by the United States would lead to violent demonstrations; and it foresees terrorism initially spiking, then declining slowly over five years. Again, if anything, it is noteworthy how quiet the Arab street was in the wake of Saddam's fall. Moreover, while the demonstration effect of removing Saddam has been wasted by the botched occupation, it did initially give momentum to the reform agenda in a number of Middle Eastern states. Nor is it true that it had no impact on the region's WMD programs. While Iran took the lesson that it had better speed up its nuclear program, Libya's Muammar Qaddafi heard a different message. In short, while anti-Americanism is on the rise, it is also the case that Arabs and Arab states took note of America's exercise of power, and not all their reactions were negative. The great tragedy is that the administration failed to capitalize on that fact, not that it ignored the conventional predictions of doom and gloom laid out by the NIC.

As for al Qaeda, it has, indeed, moved into Iraq. But it has not struck at the United States globally, as the NIC predicted it would, nor has it used the distraction of Iraq to return to Afghanistan in any substantial way, as the intelligence report suggested might happen and as the Intelligence Committee assumes has happened. There are no al Qaeda camps or training sites in Afghanistan today. The committee seems to confuse the Taliban with al Qaeda.

Why hasn't the Intelligence Committee looked into the failure of the CIA's supposed contacts in the Iraqi army and government to come over to the Coalition once the war began?

Finally, the headline news from the report was the supposed prediction by the intelligence community that sectarian violence would erupt in the wake of a U.S. invasion, Shiites would engage in bloody reprisals against Sunnis, and the dead-enders from Saddam's regime would turn to guerrilla war. Yet, as the NIC analysis also notes, this "violent conflict" between Iraqi groups would occur "unless an occupying force prevented them from doing so."

In short, the sectarian killings we have seen over the past year were not inevitable. To the contrary, until the al Qaeda attack on the Shia mosque in Samara in early 2006, it was quite striking how little Shias struck back at the Iraqi Sunni community. And contrary to the potential bloody "score-settling" predicted by the NIC in the wake of Saddam's fall, the Shia, under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, kept sectarian violence to a minimum.

Finally, the prediction that Saddam loyalists might resort to guerrilla warfare was no great insight: No one should have expected the Sunnis to assume minority status quietly. Yet the authors of the NIC report did not highlight this among their "key judgments" about the challenges to be faced in post-Saddam Iraq. Indeed, far from flagging this danger for policymakers, the authors don't bring it up until the very last lines of the report.

Of course, given how poorly Iraq has been handled, Monday morning quarterbacking is easy and to be expected. But while we're at it, why hasn't the Intelligence Committee, or any other oversight body, looked into the failure of the CIA's supposed contacts in the Iraqi army and government to come over to the Coalition once the war began, as the agency told military planners would happen? *Cobra II*, the account of the run-up to the war by Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, makes clear that Rumsfeld, Franks, and company dropped the ball when it came to planning for the occupation. But, as they also document, the expectation of having a usable Iraqi police force and army to hold things together after Baghdad fell was fueled by CIA reports that whole police units and Iraqi army divisions were likely to flip.

If the Senate committee wants to do something useful, it should report to the country whether the intelligence agency that had no assets inside al Qaeda before 9/11, no assets of note in Iraq before the first Gulf war, and no assets of note in Iraq before the second, has fixed that problem. Given our surprise at the advances in Iran's nuclear program announced this past month by the International Atomic Energy Agency, a great deal of work apparently remains to be done. ♦

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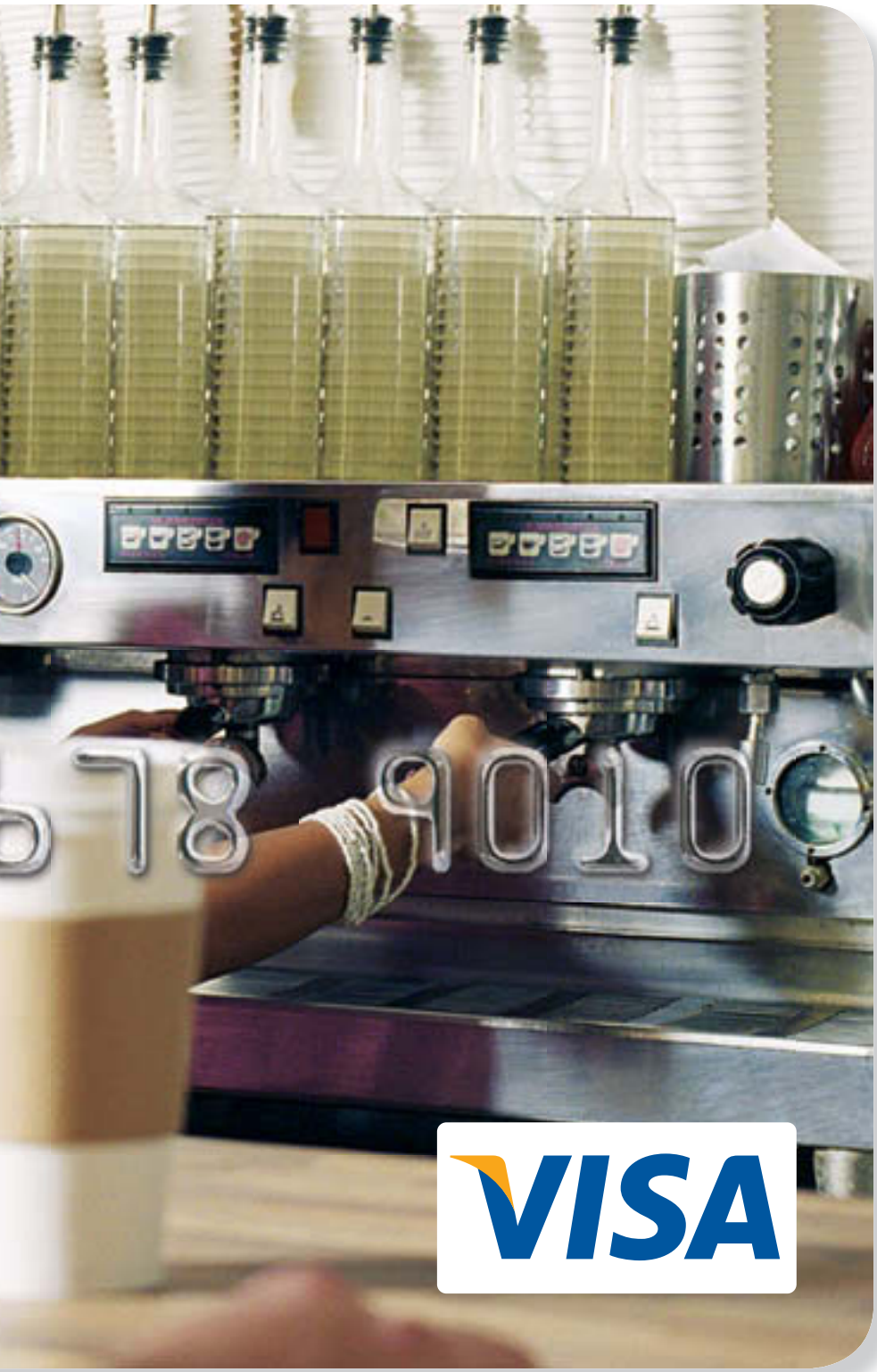

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The Other War

Afghanistan is winnable, but victory can't be taken for granted.

By Michael Fumento

Zabul Province, Afghanistan

Our convoy pulls into Forward Operating Base Lagman at 1200 hours. After three embeds in Iraq, I'm finally visiting "the forgotten war," fought in a truly exotic land rich with history. In fact, I've just seen The Castle, an amazing fortress the locals claim Alexander the Great built. So what am I thinking? My butt hurts. It's been six straight hours in a Humvee along Highway One from Kandahar Airfield and the only exercise I've gotten is shifting in my seat. My escorts are from the Romanian 812th Infantry Battalion. It might have been easy to dislike them because I was exhausted from my flight the previous day and they made me get up at 0300 to grab that oh-so-uncomfortable seat. But of the 37 NATO countries providing 35,000 personnel in Afghanistan, Romania is one of only six (besides the U.S.) that actually allow their men to fight. They deserve gratitude.

Zabul Province, our destination, is north and east of Kandahar, heading towards Kabul. It's an important Taliban gateway from Pakistan, one of five southern Pashtun provinces (out of 34 provinces total), meaning the Taliban have some measure of local support since they arose within that ethno-religious group. Days before I arrived, 16 Afghan National Army (ANA) ambush casualties arrived at FOB Lagman, overwhelming the small aid station and turning infantry and engineers into medics. (All survived.) The now-cocky Taliban then tried to repeat the trick, but this time U.S. airpower hammered them, killing at least 35. ("Taliban," incidentally, is the generic term for the enemy, used now to describe not only that group but also al Qaeda and other terrorists; the military-approved jargon is Anti-Government Elements or AGE.)

Lagman operates under the auspices of a Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT) run by the U.S. Air Force. As the name indicates, the team handles civil-affairs projects in Zabul. But the Romanian Army runs the military side. Romanian M.Ps police the nearby mud hut village of Qalat, which they tell me is fairly safe although they won't let me patrol with them there. Two weeks after I arrived the Afghan National Army would have a gun battle there, seizing what proved to be the headquarters of Mullah Dadullah, a butcher frequently called "the military mastermind of the Taliban insurgency." On May 13, Afghan and U.S. forces killed Dadullah in Helmand Province.

The Romanians' main job, however, is to patrol the 93-mile stretch of Highway One that runs through Zabul and to support the Afghan National Police (ANP) stations that line it so as to keep the highway as free as possible from Taliban interference. The Romanians launch about 50 missions a week down the highway and also have a quick reaction force in case the police stations request help. They have taken no casualties during this deployment, but previous Romanian units here were less lucky.

Highway One is vital; its recent repaving after decades of war-related pummeling has tremendously shortened the drive time from Kandahar to Kabul. Of all the civil-affairs projects underway in Afghanistan, probably none is more important than tying the nation together with good roads that facilitate both military and commercial transportation. The latter often goes by way of brightly colored jinga trucks that the Americans call "jingle trucks" and that do indeed often jingle from chimes attached to the back. (Afghans love color, as evidenced also by the nomads' tents and the flags used to mark graves. I even saw an Afghan soldier with a brightly colored AK-47.)

Lagman has a small contingent of Americans who control the other forward operating bases in Zabul, plus a fire base that provides artillery. These are from the 1st Infantry Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment based in Hohenfels, Germany. During the Indian wars and the War of 1812, the 1-4 Infantry was commanded by future President William Henry Harrison. Today it serves primarily as OPFOR, or Opposing Force, to other units in training. In Afghanistan it's gone from playing the Taliban to fighting them.

FOB Lagman is not a fun place, although at least there's no rule requiring constant body armor, as was the case where I stayed in Ramadi, Iraq. Lagman doesn't get shelled. I'm squeezed in with two AP video reporters from Spain in a room meant for one munchkin. There is a tiny PX, but it periodically closes to make supply runs to Kandahar. There are all of four male showers here, two with curtains missing. The water is hot, though. There is only

Michael Fumento, an airborne veteran, has been embedded three times in Iraq.

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The 120 mm mortar at FOB Mizan can drop 45-pound shells on enemy positions anywhere within the valley.

Photo by Michael Fumento

one computer with an Internet connection. Parts of the camp are made of mud.

Apparently they have cobras here—by which I do not mean Marine AH-1 gunship helicopters so nicknamed, but the kind that slither, hiss, and, if you're unfortunate, bite. The doctor across the way from me, Capt. Richard Slusher, assures me we have no antivenin. On the upside, it's good incentive to keep the place clean, because trash brings rodents and rodents bring snakes. They also have the ugliest, nastiest beetles I've ever seen. The little monsters fly and bite. I'm pretty sure they report directly to Osama himself.

One of the AP reporters says he believes 9/11 was a Bush administration conspiracy hung on al Qaeda. Slusher gives him hell about it—albeit in a good-natured way. I don't hear the other reporter sound out on the subject, but he never takes off his Che Guevara T-shirt. Maybe these two will provide unbiased footage and commentary notwithstanding their personal views—maybe not.

Some embeds pride themselves on getting interviews with high-level officers. But I've found that comments from lieutenant colonels and higher start to become infused with politics. The higher you go, the greater the BS-to-truth ratio. If you want spontaneous opinions you stick with lieutenants through majors, along with non-coms. That can even be true when you *want* to discuss politics, as was the case when I interviewed the commander of the Transylvania-based 812th, Maj. Ovidiu Liviu Uifaleanu.

Romania has about 750 soldiers in Afghanistan, 550 men and a few women under the 812th at Lagman. Their uniform camouflage patterns resemble something like rust-colored tiger claw marks on a yellowish background. While the American combat uniforms no longer allow the sleeves to be rolled up, the official Romanian uniform includes shorts, short-sleeved shirts, and even camouflage T-shirts with epaulets indicating rank; therefore, the soldiers can be in T-shirts while also being in full uniform. These people understand comfort.

Romania, as noted, is among the handful of allied countries with troops here that actually fight. The fighting countries ranked by total troop presence are the United States, Britain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Romania, and Estonia. The other NATO participants, many of them vastly larger than Estonia (with a population of 1.3 million, about the size Phoenix), have issued "caveats"—rules that basically forbid their forces to fight

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or even to go outside severely limited areas. These include Germany (83 million), France (64 million), Italy (58 million), and Spain (40 million). The mere presence of Italian troops threatened to bring down that nation's government, while France's new president, Nicolas Sarkozy, hinted in late April that he would shortly bring France's approximately 1,000 troops home.

Why Romania? I ask Uifaleanu. "We are a NATO country and our mission is established by the government," he says. "We are obligated by NATO membership." Spoken like a true soldier. I ask the major (and that's what I call him, for fear of mispronouncing his name) why Romania feels this obligation when so many fellow NATO members do not. "At higher echelons they make those decisions," he says. "We are keeping our promise as a member of NATO." That does imply, of course, that perhaps the others are not.

There are also about 700 Romanian troops in Iraq, most of whom operate out of Camp Dracula in Tallil. Dracula—also called Vlad Tepes or "Vlad the Impaler"—is a hero to Romanians because, despite his rather unorthodox methods, he did keep the Turks at bay, if only temporarily. Uifaleanu does say that there's strong support back home for the Afghan contingent remaining, while not so for the one in Iraq.

Here's an alternative answer for why Romania fights. Much of what Donald Rumsfeld, prompting great anger, called "Old Europe" has grown lazy, weak, and decadent. Even though many countries are at far greater risk from Islamist terror than is the United States, because they have huge populations of disgruntled Muslims, they're delighted to let others do the fighting and dying. Romania, like Estonia, after years of involuntary servitude in the Soviet empire, is delighted to have joined what remains the world's leading military alliance, and it wants to do its part.

A depressing day at the police stations

Although Afghans like to call the American Humvees "tanks," there is really no U.S. armor to speak of in Zabul. The Romanians have brought their own in the form of the B33 Zimbrul, an eight-wheeled armored personnel carrier based on a Russian model. The Zimbrul's main KPV machine gun fires what may be the world's largest non-explosive rounds at 14.5 millimeters, or .57 caliber. Those bullets wouldn't just easily pass through a mud hut; they would probably enter the front wall of the first hut in a village and exit the back wall of the last hut. That's one reason it's important to carry a smaller secondary gun, in this case, a 7.62 millimeter PKT. My hosts gave me the opportunity to fire both machine guns, and I think the KPV rattled a few fillings loose. "Our preceding unit here fell into two or maybe three ambushes," Uifaleanu says. "But the Taliban have learned."

The Taliban are also learning it can hurt to fight against the 32,000-member Afghan National Army. The ANA is better equipped, better trained, and better paid than the National Police. The Afghan army platoon at FOB Lagman is equipped with new-looking American woodland camouflage uniforms, body armor for everyone, and AK-47s in top shape. Most Iraqi army units may be unwilling to take the fight to the enemy; not so the Afghans. "They are very aggressive in the field," says Uifaleanu, "very eager to kill the Taliban." Others I speak with, including non-coms, say the same.

Unfortunately, the police aren't nearly as impressive. Courtesy of a small Romanian convoy, I visited four police outposts along Highway One. Each had a complement of about 15-20 men. The first thing you notice about these buildings is that while they have some blast and antipersonnel protection, the level of protection is low. Ideally they would all be surrounded on the outside by razor concertina wire to keep the Taliban at a distance. There would be an inside barrier—made of huge dirt-filled canvas bags called Hescos—to provide blast protection against rocket-propelled grenades. Sandbags would protect the roof. In fact I saw little wire, and the Hescos and sandbags protected only part of the perimeters. Some of the buildings had sandbags on the roofs for protection against light mortars, others didn't.

In terms of weapons and ammunition, they were no better off. I won't give exact numbers for security reasons, but for their AK-47s they had just enough ammo to sustain a brief firefight (fortunately most are quite brief). At one station, they were delighted to inform us not just how many AK magazines they had per soldier but that the magazines were completely filled. Ouch! It doesn't help that like Iraqis (or untrained soldiers anywhere), they have a tendency to fire not single shots or controlled bursts but rather to hold the trigger and let fly with a good chunk of the magazine.

Every outpost was given an RPG-7—the venerable Soviet grenade launcher—and one had a pair, but again with little ammunition. Each station had one 7.62 millimeter RPK machine gun. For these, the police seemed to have a more decent ammo supply.

Fortunately, these outposts aren't overrun as often as you might think. The Taliban carry light weapons, nothing heavier than an RPK or RPG. Maybe a mortar tube, but with no base plate, so it can't be fired accurately. If the fighting does get thick, stations can call for the Romanian quick-reaction force. But the Taliban know how long it takes the Romanians to arrive and are careful to be gone by then. So the potential Romanian firepower is what really counts.

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Not being overrun seemed near the limit of what these outposts could do. At one station they told us, "We ask in the villages, 'Why are you helping the Taliban?' and then they say, 'They take our sons and brothers and there's nothing we can do.'" At another: "We see Taliban driving by on motorcycles, but we don't have good weapons to shoot them."

Lest I be accused of violating operational security by revealing this, the Taliban obviously can see the fortifications and can determine ammo supplies with probes. When they fire several RPG rounds at an outpost and receive only one in return, that tells them something. The Taliban know; it's time the American public knew, too.

Bribes and bullets

All the Romanians can tell the police is, "We'll try to give you enough ammo and enough weapons." But for the time being it's a pipe dream. Consider that an AK bullet costs about 17 cents. That's a little over $5 for a full magazine. For a 15-man station, we could provide each policeman another magazine for about $80. Meanwhile, a single Hellfire air-to-surface missile costs $100,000.

The police themselves are a ragtag bunch, ranging in age from perhaps 14 to 70. A few wear raggedy blue official summer uniforms, while some of the younger guys at one outpost wear thick wool winter gray uniforms that look like they came from a stockpile of the Confederate States of America. Even the caps look Confederate. But most of the police wear civilian clothes, which isn't good. A uniform helps hold a unit together, and it gives a man pride.

The worst deficiency, though, is pay. While their salaries are merely $70 a month, none of the police had been paid in three months. (To use the Hellfire comparison again, one missile would pay more than 1,400 police salaries for a month.) Obviously this discourages recruiting, and when those police do finally get paid it may encourage them to take the money and run. Less obvious, except to anybody who knows the history of Afghanistan, is that bribes are more important than bullets. In fact, the conquest of the country *from* the Taliban began when the CIA flew in $3 million in cash (they would eventually spend many times that) to win over warlords to the Northern Alliance.

So the Taliban know that far more important than any weapon in their arsenal is the wad of cash supplied by sympathetic Arab oil sheikhs, Islamic charity front groups, and Osama bin Laden himself. According to a February report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "In some reported cases, the Taliban are paying up to $12 a day, three times as much as the [Afghan National Army] field soldiers, and there is evidence of defection from the national security forces to the Taliban ranks."

More than that, a lack of funds encourages some police to sell what weapons they do have. I asked B Company executive officer Lt. Keith Wei if it would be possible to supply the police with DShKs (pronounced "dishka"), a Russian-made 12.7 millimeter antiaircraft weapon adapted for ground combat. It would clean the Taliban's clocks. He was politely aghast at my ignorance. "Because they're receiving no salaries, there would be tremendous temptation to sell those to the Taliban," he said. And DShK rounds can slice through Humvee armor.

Retired General Barry R. McCaffrey's February 2007 Afghanistan report, based on personal observation but primarily outside data, is generally upbeat. "We are now on the right path," it concludes. Nevertheless it also states, "We have no real grasp of what actual [Afghan National Police] presence exists at the 355 District level operations. . . . We do know that 50 percent more Afghan police were KIA last year than [Afghan army] soldiers." It continues, "The task of creating 82,000 Afghan policemen (currently a notional 62,000 force) is a ten-year job that we must fully resource," and we are now beginning that. Yet "the effort to create the Afghan police is currently grossly under-resourced with 700 U.S. trainers." By contrast, he notes that in Kosovo we had 5,000 police mentors for 6,500 Kosovo police.

In the short term, though—which is to say *right now*—the police need weapons and ammo and proper uniforms for hot and cold weather. Most critically, we need to pay them their lousy $70 a month.

Hearts and minds

Meanwhile the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.N., and other agencies work to win over the people with public works projects in Zabul—building bridges, roads, police stations, fire stations, and schools. The United Arab Emirates funded a state-of-the-art teaching hospital. Twenty-four PRTs are stationed across Afghanistan with six, including Zabul's, headed up by the Air Force. Each team has about 90 members, including 40 active-duty airmen.

The Zabul PRT established a trade school with courses on basic computer operations, welding, automobile mechanics, plumbing, carpentry, electrical installation, construction, emergency medical technician training, nursing, and an agricultural extension program. The Taliban will probably always be able to offer tempting payments to Afghan men to take potshots at NATO and Afghan troops, but not necessarily enough to make it worth employed ones risking their lives. The PRT in May conducted a medical outreach for the Mizan district, treating more than 200 patients. Qalat's mud huts are being wired for electricity, although actually providing it will

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be a much more difficult task. Rebuilding long-neglected dams seems the best bet.

All of this information, incidentally, is from web searching. A PRT member at Lagman emailed that he was "very disgusted" with me "for the type of reporting you do"—indicating it was too negative. "Why don't you even mention what is being done in Zabul province by the PRT?" Alas, my repeated efforts to obtain information from the Provincial Reconstruction Team, including emailed requests for a spokesman to answer informational questions for just a few minutes, were rebuffed. I finally emailed the executive officer in disgust:

> So much for military complaints that the media only focus on explosions and killings while ignoring hearts and minds projects. It appears the mainstream media aren't as blameworthy in this regard as I thought. Unconventional wars are won or lost as much in the media as on the battlefield; it's unfortunate that the Air Force apparently doesn't realize that.

This is a little harsh on the Air Force generally, but I promised him that "as someone who sees this war as something to be won, I will be writing about this." So I have.

FOB Mizan

Forward Operating Base Mizan is home to the 1st Platoon of Bravo Company, 1-4 Infantry, and a platoon of Afghan National Army with three American embedded training team members. The other FOBs and firebases in Zabul are manned by other platoons of B Co. Mizan is perhaps a 25-minute helo ride from Lagman. My chariot is a CH-47 Chinook, the workhorse of Afghanistan. Relatively few UH-60 Black Hawks are used, because the Chinooks' huge twin rotors provide valuable extra lifting power in the thin mountain air. The FOB is not nearly as Spartan as I was originally led to believe. I was told in Kandahar they might not have electricity and therefore to juice up everything electronic I had before coming. But there is plenty of generator power. It's true that for the previous month they had been without an Internet connection because lightning fried an antenna, but a techie came on the same bird I did and got it back up. They have showers using water pumped from a well dug two months ago, although showers may no longer be available as we head further into the dry season and the water table drops. The water is usually heated, and they have hot chow.

Amazingly, they have essentially a full gym, with free weights, barbells, an elliptical device, and a treadmill. It was here when 1st Platoon arrived. The camp is too small for the men to go on runs, and the patrols are all mounted because everything is so spread out. So a gym is the only way the men can really keep fit, and it's a real morale-booster. Bathroom facilities are crude, as you'd expect. Waste is burned daily by some recently hired young Afghans who live inside the wire. Media sleeping quarters are a narrow bit of hallway between the soldiers' quarters and the door, shared with the techie while he awaits a helo out, and featuring constant foot traffic during the day and evening.

What's truly impressive is how well protected this place is. I'm told the camp, begun by the 173rd Airborne Brigade and later occupied by the 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), is far better in terms of both safety and creature comforts than just a few months ago. Hescos, sandbags, and concertina wire are everywhere. As at Lagman, the Americans have no armor but they have lots of late-model Humvees with a mix of M-2 .50 caliber and M240 7.62 millimeter machine guns and MK-19 40 millimeter automatic grenade launchers in the turrets. The camp also has several mortar tubes of various sizes. Conspicuously absent is an American flag. It's part of the effort to look like we're here to help, not to occupy.

The compound is busy as a beehive, which contributes to morale by reducing boredom. In my few days there, I see soldiers make both sides of the "safe house" (their quarters) even safer by extending the roof and building two new walls of sandbags. The dining facility has been sandbagged only about halfway up because they keep running out of filled bags. (I overhear one GI on the phone say they call the FOB "the Sandbag Palace.") A TV is installed just after I arrive, though strangely enough it only seems to receive sports channels. An open phone booth is also installed inside the dining facility, which has only one or two tables when I arrive but is soon filled with enough freshly built tables to accommodate everyone.

To beat the heat, soldiers get up at 0400, and the sawing and hammering begins at 0430. Summer dress here is "military casual," with jackets rarely worn and sandals almost as common as boots.

Morale seems excellent, much better than I would have expected from a unit in the middle of nowhere that rarely gets to engage the enemy. (It's not being shot at, but rather getting a piece of the enemy that boosts spirits.) I did hear one soldier bitterly complain to his wife on the phone about the just-announced extension of tours from 12 months to 15; surely others feel the same. There are worse places to be stuck in a war, but all of these troops are far, far from home. There's also something about being completely surrounded by mountains that makes you feel meek, isolated, and homesick.

The commander of this impressive outpost is 1st Lt. Kevin Stofan, from Miami Springs, Florida. At 28, he's a bit old for his rank. But that's because he only joined the Army in March 2005. "I got tired of sitting on the side-

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Firefight in Mizan

Date: February 7, 2007. Location: About six miles northwest of FOB Mizan. A task force on a 48-hour patrol comprising Army Special Forces, soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division, Light Infantry, and 1st Platoon, B Company, 1-4 Infantry sets up a trap during daylight across a known Taliban infiltration route. B Co.'s contribution, headed up by unit commander 1st Lt. Kevin Stofan, includes five Humvees carrying a variety of weaponry. Stofan is the first to detect what proves to be a formation of about 40 Taliban. "I pinpointed them in a saddle in a peanut-shaped mountain and immediately reacted by maneuvering my vehicle and another around the side," he says. No time to wait for air support.

Stofan's movement alerts the enemy and "they acted like the desperate men they were," he says. In quick succession the enemy fires five deadly RPG rounds at his vehicle. These are the most feared Taliban weapons on the battlefield, capable of shredding Humvee armor. Turret gunner Spc. Marcel Green nevertheless keeps hammering away with his 7.62 millimeter M240 medium machine gun. "He knew that an RPG round was coming and he just kept firing," says Stofan. An explosion blows off three of Green's fingers. A round blasts open all four doors, propelling driver Pfc. Jonathan Zaehringer from the truck like a rocket. "One round knocked me unconscious and I was pretty banged up," says Stofan. The medic in the vehicle, Pfc. Aaron Murray, suffered a severe concussion and shrapnel wounds to his hand.

1st Platoon's five Humvees blast away with M240s, 40 millimeter M-203 grenade-launchers, 40 millimeter Mark-19 automatic grenade-launchers, .50 caliber machine guns, and a 60 millimeter mortar. The other units won't enter the fray for another 15 minutes. Meanwhile, Stofan's Humvee is on a crest moving towards the enemy, but without a driver to hit the brakes it rolls into a gully. Zaehringer is left behind. The only unhurt and conscious man in the truck is Pvt. Stephen Wright, who joined the unit just two months earlier. He runs back up the hill, firing suppressive rounds from his M-4 carbine before grabbing Zaehringer. For all he knows, his buddy is dead, but Wright clutches the grab handle on Zaehringer's body armor and drags him back to the Humvee where SF medics later tend to him, probably saving his life. "Wright was practically fresh out of basic training," Stofan says with a bit of awe in his voice, "and he did everything automatically."

Now everybody opens up on the enemy. "We put a bad hurt on the Taliban," says Stofan. "Probably upwards of 30 were killed, although they were able to drag away most of the bodies." After an agonizing wait, a Black Hawk drops out of the sky and evacuates the worst of the wounded. Later a jet destroys the Humvee, which is far beyond salvage.

For his action, Wright (now a Pfc) is awarded the bronze star with V device, as are Stofan and Green. Green, Zaehringer, and Murray all receive purple hearts. Wright is still with the unit but doesn't like to talk about the battle. Murray is also with the unit. Green is still recovering at the U.S. military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, while Zaehringer was treated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. He's now recovering at his family's home in a small town near Chicago.

Just another undocumented episode of heroism and hell in America's forgotten war.

—Michael Fumento

lines," he says. "Pretty much the reason I joined was to go to war. I was happy to deploy to Afghanistan."

FOB Mizan wasn't plopped down here to keep the Taliban out, which is simply beyond its capability. In Zabul as a whole, there's only one NATO or Afghan soldier per seven square miles, and the ratio may be worse in Mizan. Rather, the idea is to inhibit the movement of the Taliban and improve security in Mizan district. The FOB's 120 millimeter mortar, with a maximum range of four and a half miles, is an impressive weapon. Directed from any of the numerous observation posts that scan the countryside, the 45-pound shells can hit the Taliban anywhere on the inside of the mountain range that surrounds the camp. I watched a drill on an almost pitch-black night. Within about five minutes the soldiers had the big tube blasting away, one round right after another.

But patrols are the main tool for keeping the Taliban on the run. "With random patrols their movement is completely inhibited because they never know when we'll be there," says Stofan, "and they do not want to fight us. They don't have the numbers; they don't have the discipline and skill; and they don't have the weapons."

Unfortunately, unless you employ up-armored donkeys, about a third of the region can't be reached by patrols. Yet even patrols can't secure a village. "You have to be there on a permanent basis," says Lt. Stofan. "The villagers worry about the Taliban because they strong-arm people for shelter or food and then move on to the next town," he continues. "When they pass through in large numbers they leave behind nuisance guys to close schools and clinics by kidnapping teachers and doctors and scaring off road crews." A week before I arrived, Taliban killed five Afghan security guards protecting a road construction project in the Mizan district.

"The last school in Mizan closed two years ago," says Stofan, "yet about 50-60 percent of the population is less

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than 14 years old. There's a rapidly growing younger generation not getting educated. There is some Koran teaching going on, and I asked the instructor if he'd expand teachings to grammar and math if I obtained the books." The teacher agreed, and two months later he got them.

Except perhaps for additions to the base, everything moves slowly out here—sometimes imperceptibly so. Literacy rate estimates for Zabul range from 1 percent to 15 percent but in either case it's the worst in the country and it's even lower for women. In fact, I never saw a woman the whole time in Zabul except for nomads along the highway. The nomads are the least culturally strict people in the country. "You could take a picture of one of these villages and it would look like something out of a nativity scene," says Stofan. I did, and they do.

Numerous crops grow in Zabul, but you can guess which one is most important economically. On one Mizan patrol our Humvee became mired in mud and I was able to get out and walk around a bit until called back to the vehicle when six apparent Taliban moved into position across an easily fordable river from us. I came to a low mud wall, looked over, and—lo!—several acres of beautiful, deadly poppies. Poppy eradication is not working in Afghanistan. Opium production rose a startling 59 percent last year over the year before, notwithstanding USAID's assertion that it would be cut by 30 percent. But we need to consider the possibility that it shouldn't work, at least for now. Raising the flowers is apparently 70 times more lucrative than raising wheat, with wheat barely allowing farmers to break even. "Opium cultivation accounts for nearly 60 percent of the country's gross national product," according to USAID. Waging a "drug war" while at the same time waging a real war may be too much to ask of already greatly overstrained resources.

The Zabul Afghans

Iraqis are world champion complainers. Not so here. "I have never heard an Afghan complain," says Lt. Stofan. "It is always in the form of 'if you have this' or 'we could really use this.'" It is always followed by the disclaimer "We are very thankful for what you have already given us." Even the elderly Pashtun aren't nearly as reserved as you'd expect. They love to chat, always accompanied by chai tea (which in Afghanistan is simply black or green tea sweetened with sugar). That's understandable because with virtually no TVs, computers, iPods, or reading ability, chatting is about the only pastime there is. Further, observes Stofan, "one thing I appreciate about them is that although they may believe in one thing or another they are not judgmental on our values or traditions. They respect the fact that we shave or keep our shoes on indoors, for example, because it is what we do. They are not offended by it or frown upon it."

The younger Afghans are quite outgoing. I was first introduced to those who live on the base when I began talking to one whose job was burning feces—as good a way to meet someone as any. Two were "terps" (interpreters) who kept insisting I take their photos knowing I would nevertheless have to delete them immediately for their own safety. I remarked to Stofan that I thought they liked me a bit too much because our frequent chai chats were cutting into my work time. He offered that I ought to see them on Thursday nights when they dress up as women and commented on the pervasiveness of homosexuality in the Pashtun culture, a result of severe segregation of the sexes.

Later I meet the district chief, Mohammed Younis, and the young police chief commander, Mohammed Khan (nicknamed "Krazy Bone"). He has the thickest shock of hair I've ever seen on a man, resembling a black-colored eagle's nest. He continually runs one hand through it while his other seemingly seeks gold deep inside his nose. Still, I am told Krazy Bone is a top-notch police chief, despite his idiosyncrasies and his youth, and his men really do seem to have their act together. Younis, conversely, is a picture of dignity in his turban and white flowing clothes.

Guarding the gate to Younis's compound is a Hollywood image of a mujahedeen dressed in dark brown. Again demonstrating the Afghan love of color, he has a little orange ribbon attached to the wire stock of his AK-47 (see photo at right). He wears a hammer-and-sickle belt buckle presumably taken from the body of a Soviet soldier or a member of the old Communist government army. Atop his head is a brown *pakol*, a flat wool cap indicating he fought under Ahmed Shah Massoud. Massoud was the most effective commander against both the Soviets and as head of the Northern Alliance against the Taliban until al Qaeda assassinated him two days before 9/11.

It's fascinating to watch Stofan converse with Younis via the terp. In America, we usually exchange pleasantries and then get down to business. In Afghanistan, you exchange pleasantries intermittently throughout any conversation, such as asking a man about his recent pilgrimage. The first order of business is compensation for a man whose house was accidentally struck by an American bomb, wounding eight residents. He was to receive about $4,000 and Stofan's main concern was that this was an old man who would be walking from town carrying a heck of an incentive for a mugging. (He would later make it back safely.)

The district chief agrees, but seems more interested in money to support his operations. You can't blame him.

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Michael Fumento

The guard at Mohammed Younis's compound

he will buy pomegranates from the locals, but Younis won't hear of it. "We will give them to you," he says, waving his hand, "all that you need."

A WorldPublicOpinion.org poll released last December indicates that the district chief and his people are no exception in their hatred of the Taliban; a scant 7 percent of Afghans said they have a positive view of them, fewer than in a poll 11 months earlier. They have not forgotten the horrors of the Taliban version of sharia Islam, which stacked extremism upon extremism. Aside from that, it's important to understand that Afghans see even Afghan Taliban as foreigners and intruders. That's because unlike in Iraq, the insurgents are rarely local. If you're not from their village, you're not one of them. The Taliban themselves generally feel they don't belong to any country, and who are the Afghans to disagree? Meanwhile, only 25 percent of those surveyed said they had a somewhat or very unfavorable attitude toward the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, although that is a higher figure than 11 months previously.

He says Krazy Bone's men haven't been paid in five months. "We can fight better if we are paid," he insists while fingering his prayer beads. He then quickly adds that he thinks the problem has nothing to do with Americans but rather is a bureaucratic snafu in Qalat and that the money will be arriving soon. Stofan promises he will ask "my boss," meaning Deputy Task Force Zabul Commander Maj. Christopher Clay, to intercede, and says that in the past such efforts have met with success.

The district chief also offers that the townspeople like us very much and that when American or Afghan soldiers disrupt their lives with raids, the locals "blame it on the Taliban" for prompting the raids. Is it true, I wonder, or does he say this simply to be hospitable? After hours of conversation I conclude that this is a man who speaks his mind, and if he says the townspeople are savvy enough to realize that the Taliban are the root of any problems with the military, he means it. In one conversation Stofan tells Younis that if he gets some money

Encouraging also is a mid-2006 poll from the San Francisco-based Asia Foundation that found 77 percent of respondents say they are satisfied with the way democracy works in Afghanistan. Another favorable marker is that slightly over half say they're more prosperous than under the Taliban, while only a fourth say they're less prosperous. In fact, USAID reports the country's economy, not counting opium sales, is growing a robust 12 percent per year. Finally, almost 90 percent say they trust both the Afghan army and police.

They are by no means deeply content. Forty-two percent think the progress of reconstruction is excellent or good, leaving 58 percent thinking it's fair or poor. And while 62 percent still think their nation is going in the right direction, that's down substantially from 83 percent in the poll 11 months before. In other words, we still have plenty of good will in Afghanistan, but we're in danger of squandering it.

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A winnable war

I can't say how often I heard officers or noncoms say, "This war is winnable." Implicit is that it's also losable; but what they really mean is winnable in comparison to Iraq. It's strange but true that Afghanistan—with four major ethnic groups, two official languages, and almost countless lesser languages—is far more of a proud, united nation than Iraq. They have Sunni and Shia, but their differences are just another excuse for a chat over chai. It's way too early to say if the Iraqi "surge" is working, but the much-anticipated massive Taliban spring offensive in Afghanistan has thus far proved a trickle rather than a deluge.

Still, it would be a mistake to assume time is on our side. Afghans seem to be losing patience with the war effort, and while that may not help the Taliban, it can certainly hinder President Hamid Karzai in his efforts to keep the warlords at bay. It's warlords, not sectarianism, that pose the internal threat. The most powerful of these is General Abdul Rashid Dostum, one of the Northern Alliance leaders against the Taliban. But before that, he fought on the side of the Soviets and the Communist government. Probably to undercut the government, which has essentially excluded him, he announced in May that he can raise an army and drive out the Taliban in six months.

Pakistani president General Pervez Musharraf has just called for negotiating with the Taliban, and a new survey shows almost two-thirds of Canadians think we should parley. Last October, Senate majority leader Bill Frist also called for negotiations, as did a Canadian think tank report in March. This would be astonishingly shortsighted, insofar as the Taliban are fairly inept militarily but once negotiated and bribed their way to control as much as 95 percent of the country. Yet now even the Afghan Senate has voted for a truce to be followed by negotiations and withdrawal of NATO forces.

Of course, if Musharraf were serious about ending the war, he would stop his double-dealing. For all his talk about negotiations, his own granted the Taliban what amounts to autonomy in the lawless border region of Waziristan ostensibly in exchange for a promise not to cross into Afghanistan to fight. The Taliban instantly broke the deal, but now Musharraf says the West needs to learn from his actions. Indeed, it should.

Moreover, at some point we're going to start wondering why we fight so hard to keep al Qaeda out of Afghanistan when they've shown they're perfectly capable of running operations out of eastern Pakistan. General Dostum sweetened his offer to restive Afghans by saying his men wouldn't stop at Afghanistan's borders but would sweep into Waziristan as well, the main Taliban and al Qaeda sanctuary, which Musharraf tolerates. Although Musharraf fears Pakistani Islamists as a threat to his own power, he has no problem with them if they're isolated. He is no friend of Afghanistan. If the Taliban were uprooted from Waziristan, it would not only destroy al Qaeda's new headquarters but tremendously shorten the length of the war.

Fought on a shoestring

I've only been in small parts of Iraq and a small part of Afghanistan, but I've seen enough to know that while the Iraq effort is awash with money but lacking in men, the war in Afghanistan is being fought on a shoestring in terms of both. There will be about 155,000 U.S. troops in Iraq when the U.S. buildup is complete, but there are only about 27,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, a country larger in both geography and population. A massive concrete blast wall in Iraq is a mere mud wall in Afghanistan. "It takes four weeks here just to get cement," Lt. Wei says. "We need to help build and to provide security, but we just don't have the funds. Everybody here understands what needs to be done but their hands are tied by a lack of resources in both funds and people. We could pacify Zabul in probably a year if they pumped money into here like they do Iraq."

As to the number of soldiers, Stofan says: "I see a solution in sight for Afghanistan; it's just going to take some more guys." Wei seconds that. "We know how to win here," says Wei. "But we're so shorthanded. Every platoon we have is covering what used to be a company-sized sector."

According to the McCaffrey report, while the situation is getting better, "the war in Afghanistan has been shamefully under-resourced by DOD throughout the entire intervention in terms of interagency involvement, U.S. combat forces, political will, and nation-building resources."

Yet together, both wars plus all other defense spending consume about 3.8 percent of gross domestic product, or just over a third of the GDP percentage spent at the height of the Vietnam war. Total U.S. forces currently in both Iraq and Afghanistan amount to just a third of the 540,000 employed for the limited purpose of driving Saddam's forces out of Kuwait in 1991. Yet that still might not be a problem in Afghanistan if NATO nations didn't refuse to pull their weight—in total personnel contributed, combat soldiers, or defense expenditures. Only six members spend as much as 2 percent of their GDP on defense. Last year the then-supreme NATO commander said of the alliance's efforts in Afghanistan, "We have about 102 national restrictions [the "caveats"], 50 of which I judge to be operationally significant." Even as they refer to America as a bellicose "cowboy" nation, they sit back and let us and a handful of other countries expend the money and blood.

"You can see victory on the horizon," says Wei. "We just don't have the means to get there." ♦

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White House / CNP / Corbis

The diarist in his White House study, 1987

Reagan After Dark

Every evening, a summary of the day

BY CRAIG SHIRLEY

As Ronald Reagan lay close to death from a gunshot wound on Monday, March 30, 1981, at George Washington University Hospital, he had only three things on his mind. The first was that he wanted to see his beloved Nancy. The second was to try to stay conscious while his lungs filled with blood. This he did by focusing his attention on one item in the operating theater: "I focused on the ceiling tile and prayed" while his life was seeping away. The third thing was his faith in God and the conundrum of how to be a loving Christian while hating John Hinckley, the man who had shot him and three other men.

Reagan solved this problem by praying; not for himself, but for Hinckley. "I realized I couldn't ask for Gods [sic] help while at the same time I felt hatred for the mixed up young man who had shot me. Isn't that the meaning of the lost sheep? I began to pray for his soul and that he would find his way back to the fold." He then pledged the balance of his life to God: "Whatever happens now I owe my life to God and will try to serve him in every way I can."

The Reagan Diaries
Edited by Douglas Brinkley
HarperCollins, 784 pp., $35

During the week of the Reagan funeral in June 2004, innumerable Reagan "experts" babbled endlessly on television and seemed only to believe that Ronald Reagan was a nice guy with a good sense of humor—a sort of global Captain Kangaroo. What they didn't know, and what these diaries now reveal, is that Reagan was a man of great passion, great ideas, great anger, great ideology, great pragmatism, and great love. He liked a good joke but he loved a good conversation.

Though some think Reagan didn't have a temper, he himself admitted that he did. In an unpleasant phone conversation with Senator Pete Domenici, the president inscribed, "I got mad." Nancy was always on his mind, and whenever they were apart, he missed her terribly and wrote about his "loneliness" when she was away: "I don't like an empty White House." He worried also that she didn't eat enough.

Whatever anyone thought they knew about Reagan, especially those who did not work closely with him, they will have to unlearn, and then re-educate themselves by reading these diaries, brilliantly edited by Douglas Brinkley. In an interview, Brinkley pointed me to a fascinating entry from late January 1982. The Reagans had visited an exhibit dedicated to Franklin Roosevelt

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at the Smithsonian Institution: "The press is dying to paint me as now trying to undo the New Deal," he wrote. "I reminded them I voted for FDR 4 times. I'm trying to undo the 'Great Society.'"

Too many, over too many years, have deliberately misunderstood Reagan, or injected themselves into the story, or just plain didn't pay attention. Brinkley lets Reagan be Reagan—and rather than getting in the way, he edits out only the extraneous to let the reader focus on the mind, emotions, and humor, and the trials and successes, of the eight years of the Reagan presidency. Brinkley was under no mandate from the Reagan Library or from Nancy Reagan. At no time did anyone tell him to take out anything that would embarrass either Reagan, his administration, his staff, or his policies. This is to the benefit of history because, as Brinkley says, his mission was "to do a fastball down the middle . . . just a straight editing job."

Reagan is the only president besides James K. Polk to have kept a comprehensive daily diary, and Brinkley wisely turned to the example of the old Columbia historian, Allan Nevins, who edited the Polk diaries, for guidance. The leatherbound volumes were kept in the private residence in the White House, and the last thing the president did every evening before turning in was to make a journal entry. Nancy Reagan, it turns out, also kept a daily diary, and they often wrote together each night.

Reagan's anticommunism was set in stone from day one. Indeed, only a few days into his administration, a log entry for February 4, 1981, reads: "Trade was supposed to make Soviets moderate, instead it has allowed them to build armaments instead of consumer products. Their socialism is an ec. failure. Wouldn't we be doing more for their people if we let their system fail instead of constantly bailing it out." He was always chary around Mikhail Gorbachev as he was with other Soviet officials.

Reagan had several pet peeves. First, he despised it when conservatives accused him of not being loyal to conservatism, and he made no bones about naming names, including those of Richard Viguerie and Howard Phillips. Early in the administration, Viguerie, publisher of *Conservative Digest*, had produced a cover story accusing the Reagan administration of being taken over by big business interests associated with George H.W. Bush and James Baker. Reagan received a letter from Viguerie "with copy of *Conservative Digest*. He tried to write in sorrow, not anger about my betrayal of the conservative cause. He used crocodile tears for ink." Astonishingly, Reagan worried that he would not be well received at the 1982 Conservative Political Action Conference dinner because of *Conservative Digest*. But "I was interrupted a dozen times with applause and got a lengthy standing ovation," he wrote proudly.

Reagan had an ego, dispelling yet another myth. He was happy when he got good polling reports from Richard Wirthlin and was ecstatic when he felt he gave a particularly good speech or press conference. Reagan was asked by the ABC White House correspondent Sam Donaldson if he bore any blame for the bad economy of 1982, and replied: "Oh my yes. I share the responsibility. I was a Dem. for years." He rather enjoyed the repartee with Donaldson. Reagan gave a speech to the National Rifle Association that went over schedule by 15 minutes "because of applause including a standing ovation." When he performed badly he was his own worst critic. In any case, readers may be surprised to learn that Reagan either wrote his own speeches or often rewrote those drafted by speechwriters.

Other revelations: Jack Kemp sometimes got on his nerves: "Jack Kemp now knows I'm mad. He's against us on IMF increase but promised he wouldn't work against us. . . . I'm teed off with him." Robert Byrd and Tip O'Neill got on his nerves as well. The mythology in Washington is that O'Neill and Reagan were friends, but Reagan regarded O'Neill warily and thought he was far too partisan. (O'Neill betrayed his own mixed feelings about Reagan in his autobiography.)

Jimmy Carter is another personage Reagan could not warm to. Reagan had presented the Congressional Gold Medal posthumously to Robert F. Kennedy, and the entire Kennedy family returned to the White House for the ceremony. But the medal had been struck in 1978, and Reagan shook his head and wondered why President Carter had not awarded the medal himself: "It was voted by Cong. in 1978 and the former Pres. never presented it." Carter also failed to give a posthumous Congressional Gold Medal to Hubert Humphrey, but Reagan presented it to Humphrey's family: "I don't know what was with Pres. Carter—this Medal was voted by Congress in 1979."

Reagan liked new ideas and wrote that he was impressed with a concept of Newt Gingrich's to freeze the budget in 1983. He loved the idea of a space-based antinuclear weapons system. He could be droll: When his longtime political aide Stuart Spencer gave him a 1984 campaign book, Reagan commented that it was "a monster book (like an L.A. phone book). . . . I'm supposed to read it." Alexander Haig bothered Reagan. When Haig finally left the administration in 1982, Reagan sarcastically confided to his journal: "Actually, the only disagreement was over whether I made policy or the Secretary of State." But many conservatives Reagan genuinely liked. He appreciated one meeting organized by Paul Weyrich—although he called him "hard core"—and he admired Phyllis Schlafly: "She is darned effective."

Reagan was very sensitive to press coverage of both himself and people he liked, or who worked for him. When his controversial Environmental Protection Agency administrator ran afoul

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of the media, he wrote: "Most important event—the Press Conf. By the time I got to it I was mad as h—l. I'd watched the news and seen the witch hunt that is on for Anne Gorsuch at E.P.A. The media is a lynch mob that thinks it smells blood." Here's another entry: "Called Don Devine who withdrew his name from the Sen. Confirmation process. This was another lynching. He did just what I wanted him to do in his appointed position and he'll be greatly missed. He saved the govt. $6 Bil.—something his Senate critics have never done."

Reagan was equally protective of Interior Secretary James Watt, a liberal bête noire, and when the press or the Democrats on Capitol Hill went after his people—unfairly, he believed—Reagan often referred to a "lynching" or a "lynch mob." He called Bob Woodward a "liar" for claiming to have interviewed CIA director William Casey on his deathbed. (Doctors had told Reagan that Casey was unconscious, and in no condition to talk to anybody, while afflicted with terminal cancer.)

Reagan was also aware of staff conflicts. In early 1983, Reagan wrote about a meeting with Lyn Nofziger, of whom he was greatly fond. Nofziger had left the White House but wanted to come back: "Lyn N. has evidenced a desire to come back to us. He wants to report directly to me—this, of course, is upsetting to Jim B. I'd like to have Lyn back but it's a touchy thing to work out." Of course, Jim B. was James Baker, Reagan's first chief of staff, and the battles between the old Army Ranger and the old Marine were legendary around Washington in the 1980s. Before Haig's departure, Reagan "called in Dick Allen and Al Haig and ordered a halt to the sniping."

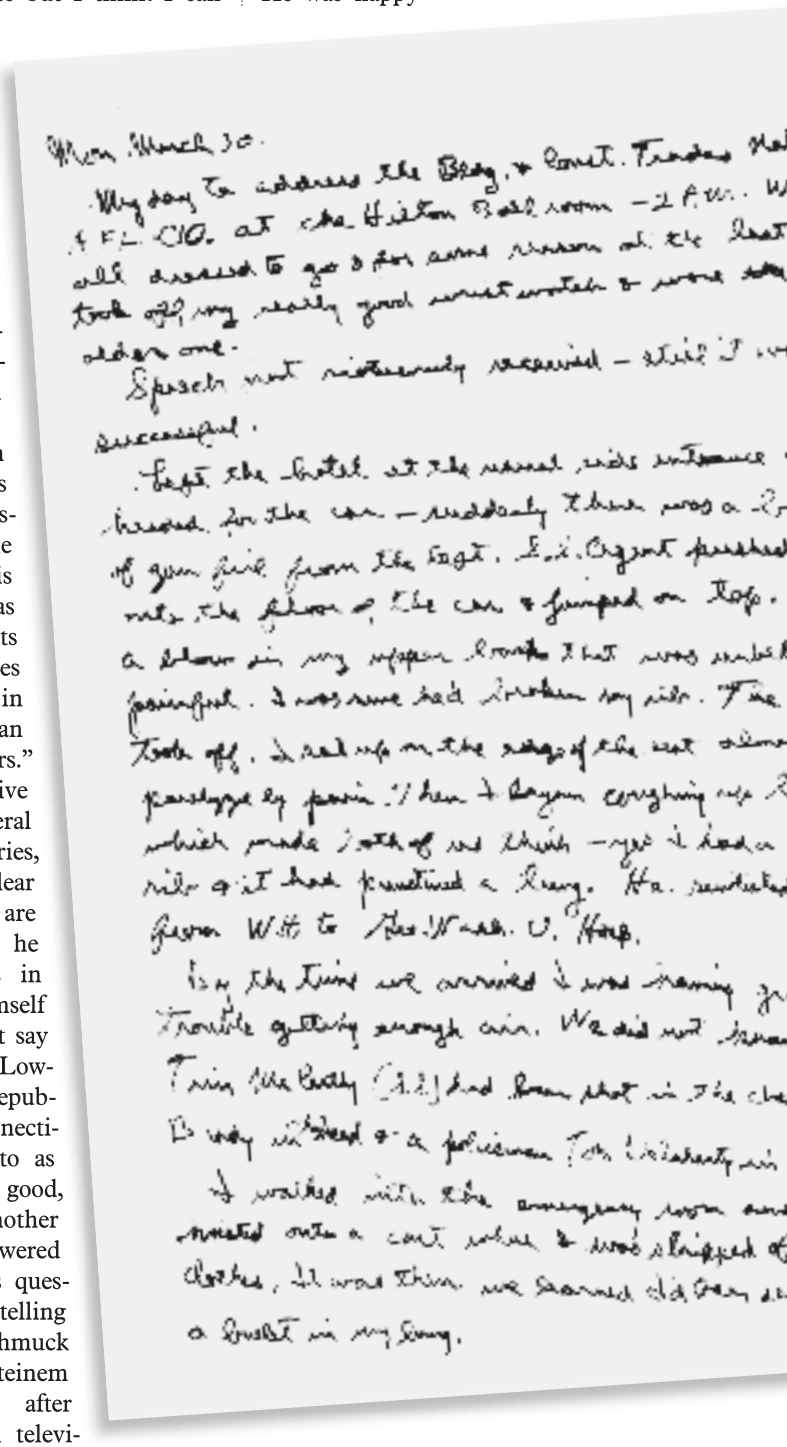
Reagan was hands-on when the need called for it.

The conventional wisdom is that Reagan didn't know people's names, even those closest around him. This is complete nonsense. The diaries are filled with references to the great and not-so-great, accompanied by specific observations, complaints, and praise. He clearly started out liking his budget director David Stockman, but after taking Stockman "to the woodshed" for his comments to journalist William Greider about Reagan's tax cuts, he soured on Stockman and believed he was trying to trick him into raising taxes. Reagan was confident in his negotiating skills: Regarding dealings with Congress, he wrote, "The boys are playing games but I think I can snooker them." Of Republican Congressman Bill Hendon of North Carolina, Reagan confided that he thought Hendon was "off his rocker" over U.S. complicity regarding servicemen missing in action in Vietnam.

Another myth is that Reagan's Alzheimer's Disease began in the last years of his presidency, but as Brinkley points out, Reagan "writes more fulsomely in the latter years than in the first years." Reagan is tentative in the first several months of his entries, but it becomes clear that the diaries are therapeutic as he expressed things in confidence to himself that he could not say publicly. Sen. Lowell Weicker, Republican of Connecticut, is referred to as a "pompous, no good, fathead." On another occasion: "I answered Lowell Weicker's question without telling him what a schmuck he is." Gloria Steinem earned his ire after watching her on television: She is "ignorant" and a "liar."

Though he clearly relished the presidency, he craved the privacy of a walk in solitude, or horseback riding, which he did several times a week. He once took a flight on a small jet and wrote that one "can get spoiled" pretty quickly on Air Force One.

Reagan was extremely competitive. He was happy



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to see Jerry Brown defeated by Pete Wilson in their 1982 Senate race: "Bye, Bye Brown." In 1984, watching the Democratic national convention, he observed that Walter Mondale was "introduced by millionaire-son of wealth Sen. Ted Kennedy, who assails me as the friend of the rich." On another occasion in 1984 Reagan took note of the rudeness of Geraldine Ferraro. He was proud of his victory that year: "Well 49 states, 59% of the vote and 525 electoral votes. The press is now trying to prove it wasn't a landslide . . . onto the ranch."

He liked to watch a movie in the evening, looked forward to weekends at Camp David, intimate dinners with friends like Paul Laxalt, and time at the ranch. He despised Mondays, cherished his weekends, and said so often. (This reveals, according to Brinkley, his "blue collar origins.") People he genuinely liked included Laxalt, George Shultz, Howard Baker, George H.W. Bush, Charlton Heston, Jeane Kirkpatrick, William Clark, George Will, and William Buckley. He looked forward to meeting sports greats, but also John Paul II. He enjoyed Laxalt's annual "Lamb Fry"—except for "the delicacy of the evening . . . lamb gonads. They made for lots of humor but they're not my favorite food."

He clearly loved his children and worried about each. One day, after several bouts with Patti and Ron when unpleasant conversations took place between Mrs. Reagan and her children—they always seemed to need money, and Patti had abused her Secret Service detail—Reagan wearily wrote, "Insanity is hereditary—you catch it from your kids."

Reagan almost never swore in his entries; the most he usually wrote was "G.D." or "h—l" or "d—n." But there is this funny passage: "I phoned Berke Breathed—cartoonist who does Bloom County. He obviously thought I was calling to bitch about something. I called to thank him . . . where he had Nancy in the strip looking lovely. He's sending me the original." And he could be crafty in his disdain: "[Navy Secretary James] Webb resigned over Navy budget cuts. I don't think Navy was sorry to see him go." He was blunt in his assessment of Texas congressman Jim Wright, calling him a "storm trooper." Though he often groused about the media, and sometimes about Republican party officials and various conservatives, he never, ever complained about meeting and talking to his fellow Americans—and, indeed, relished these public and private events.

There is a touching entry about a woman in Indiana who was having hard times. Tenderly, he wrote her a check for $100 to help her along, but a banker didn't cash the check, telling the woman's son it was not intended to be cashed and she wanted to keep it as a souvenir: "I phoned Mrs. Gardner and told her to cash it and I'd send the cancelled check back" for her to have as a keepsake. The call with the struggling woman put "a lump in my throat. . . . She sounded like the nicest kind of person." He read a story one morning about an unemployed young black man—"Mr. Andrews"—in New York, who risked his life saving a 75-year-old blind man who had fallen onto the subway tracks. Reagan called the man to congratulate him, and found out that he was being considered for a job. Reagan called the company manager to put in a plug: "Andrews has a job."

In the first years of his administration, Reagan writes tentatively about events and derisively about political enemies; but in the later years he seems to forget about his critics and is focused on more important things. In 1986 he was anxious to sign a new immigration bill for one reason: "We need to get control of our borders." Reagan was suspicious of his Chinese hosts after he found five listening devices in his suite in Beijing. At one point, during Iran-contra, he took Oliver North to task for claiming to have briefed him on the arms-for-hostages deal at Camp David. North had said on tape that such a meeting took place but, wrote Reagan, "It is complete fiction. There have been *no* meetings with North at Camp D. He's never been there while I've been President."

On November 24, 1986, Reagan learned for the first time about Iran-Contra and about "our Col. North"—thus creating some distance: "North didn't tell me about this." He also wrote of his concerns that North might "lie" about him while testifying on Capitol Hill. From late 1986 until January 1989 the distraction of North cropped up from time to time until, on his last day in the White House, Reagan turned down his request for a pardon.

Reaganites of all stripes will be happy that they are included in his diaries, from his political director Frank Donatelli to Peggy Noonan to Lee Edwards and Tom Winter, Ken Khachigian and Allen Ryskind. Little, it seems, escaped Reagan's attention. Everything was an adventure for Reagan, and at age 77, as he and Mrs. Reagan were leaving the White House for the last time, his last entry declares, "Then home and start of a new life." He was always looking forward.

I am aware of the complaints, especially from conservatives, about Douglas Brinkley and his books on Jimmy Carter and John Kerry: that he grew too fond of his subjects, or that Brinkley is a "celebrity historian." But I am hard pressed to understand how this would have ruled out Brinkley from editing the diaries. Had the diaries been edited by a conservative they might well have been dismissed by the media and academia. Now they cannot be ignored.

Reagan was a great man, but he was also flawed, like all men. These diaries are rich in detail and the manly virtues, along with Reagan's human qualities. They are, says Brinkley, "Reagan's gift to the American people," and in choosing Brinkley, the Reagan library, trustee Fred Ryan, and Nancy Reagan chose well. Brinkley concludes that Reagan was "brilliant," "a great American president," and "we have to look at Reagan as an intellectual."

Ronald Reagan had always belonged to the conservative movement, but conservatives should cheer because now he, too, "belongs to the ages." ♦

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Man of Letters

Kingsley Amis, the laureate in prose of postwar Britain.

BY MICHAEL WEISS

In Kingsley Amis's comic masterpiece, *Lucky Jim*, the protagonist, the young college lecturer Jim Dixon, realizes in a rare moment of optimism how an unpleasant situation can be made tolerable: "The one indispensable answer to an environment bristling with people and things one thought were bad was to go on finding out new ways in which one could think they were bad. The reason why Prometheus couldn't get away from his vulture was that he was keen on it, not the other way around."

The Life of Kingsley Amis
by Zachary Leader
Pantheon, 1,008 pp., $39.95

Like almost everything Amis ever wrote, this observation was self-revealing. Right away we know we're dealing with someone with an ecstatic hatred of bores, pedants, and fools, who sees opposition as the only means of escape. Either you become a misanthrope lurking in the corner of the party, or you become the life of the damned thing by making fun of everybody else.

Zachary Leader's excellent new biography establishes that Amis took the second route, one not without its hazards. The funniest postwar British novelist—and fair candidate for funniest human being committed to the printed word—was a middle-class Byron who destroyed two marriages, then ate and drank himself into blimpishness. The main task of these thousand pages is to redeem Amis from his worst vices—misogyny leading the pack—by showing how they were transmuted into creative virtues. As Leader puts it, "Few writers have written as perceptively about bad behavior as Amis or been as consistently accused of it."

To look back on this outsize life is to witness enormous appetites fulfilled and, more impressively, popularized for mass consumption. If the merger of "high" and "low" culture ever had a grace period, it was while Amis was at the typewriter. He compared Ian Fleming to Homer and published the first critical study of the James Bond series, even clapping out a not-bad 007 adventure himself. The man who missed his day in court to help get the ban lifted on *Lady Chatterley's Lover* because he was busy bedding a gamine admirer also memorably panned Nabokov's salacious masterpiece: "Do not misunderstand me if I say that one of the troubles with *Lolita* is that, so far from being pornographic, it is not pornographic enough." Amis exalted science fiction into something worthy of serious consideration, and tried to do the same for page-turning genres like the ghost story and murder mystery, both of which he experimented in. He penned a highly consultable, indeed philosophical, chapbook on the varieties of alcoholic experience, for which he did the long, hard thinking.

Angry Young Man? Not quite. Amis was the founder of Men's Studies.

Born in 1922, Amis was blessed with a slightly absurd father, a mid-level careerist in the mustard industry, who had declining bourgeois class resentment to spare, and a fondness for Gilbert and Sullivan that had his only child reaching for the jazz albums in short order. "Daddy A" did, however, refine his son's comic instinct by instructing him in the art of mimicry. Philip Larkin, whom Amis befriended at Oxford, once registered his lifelong correspondent's ablest physical gift: Kingsley could "do" the local comrade, the Irish tenor, and the Russian radio announcer broadcasting from the Eastern Front, all right. But it was the legendary routine, only twice performed, involving "three subalterns, a Glaswegian driver and a jeep breaking down and refusing to start somewhere in Germany" that had the future author of "This Be the Verse" realizing he'd met his match.

Is it any wonder? Amis was one of the 20th century's most *audible* prose stylists—you could *hear* his voice booming off the page, even when his notorious "late" prosody became a forbidding metastasis of clauses. Writing was for him an extension of full-bodied impersonation. In the years of declining health, he even gave himself a heart murmur imitating a bunch of tramps coughing and wheezing at a bus shelter. It was value for EKG, according to those who beheld it.

As for the local comrade and subalterns in Germany: The jester knew whereof he mocked. Amis was a scholarship lad whose university education was offset, or interrupted, by two formative events. The first was his faddish but prolonged membership in the Communist party, the second was World War II, in which Amis served as a discipline-averse signals officer. Apparatchik meetings and the army were the ideal settings in which to declare boredom one's mortal enemy, as well as to sharpen an innate rebelliousness against authority, be it martial, literary, or pedagogic.

As a university instructor—a job that twice took him to the United States, his "second home"—Amis located his rightward shift in the moment education standards began to flag in Britain, largely as a result of democratized enrollment. In later years, the joke was on anyone who thought the piss-talking eminence of the Garrick Club, or the bristling reactionary of the opinion page, was ever unselfconscious about the role he was playing—indeed, the role people came to expect him to play.

Michael Weiss is associate editor of Jewcy *magazine.*

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Kingsley Amis, 1985

Corbis / Bryan Colton

Leader is especially shrewd about distinguishing Amis's scabrous Tory routine from his convictions. Much like the qualities that aligned him with the "Movement" of postwar English poetry—defined as antisentimental, ironic, and skeptical—Kingsley's conservatism was an act of intellectual and emotional negation rather than positive assertion.

"I'm a Thatcherite, all right," he told Blake Morrison in 1984, "but I don't want what I and a lot of people vaguely feel to be turned into an ideology." Alongside his close friends, the Sovietologist Robert Conquest and the Hungarian-Russian dissident Tibor Szamuely, Amis became a sort of color commentator to their studied anticommunism. Ethnic jokes and "bloody lefty"-baiting abounded at the famed "fascist" lunches at Bertorelli's, but as Christopher Hitchens has noted of these raucous affairs, the minute real, "one-dimensional, humorless bigotry" was introduced, "they were bored by it."

In Amis's *Memoirs*, he recounts a night out with a truly embarrassing drunk, the *Observer* reviewer Philip Toynbee. When joined at the table by a mulatto girl, Toynbee asked what it was like "be[ing] a colored person in London these Days? You know, what's it *like*?" Amis's response was characteristic: "To say that I wanted to hit him, should have hit him, should have wanted to hit him would not be enough. Over all the intervening years I have not been able to think of anything more insulting, ignorant, inept, boring, bad-name-gathering, etc. he could have said in the circumstances." Amis knew when to be morally serious because this was at the exact moment when comedy failed.

"What's it *feel* like being mildly anti-Semitic? Describe it," Martin Amis once asked his father.

"Well. Very mild, as you say. If I'm watching the end of some new arts program I might notice the Jewish names in the credits and think, Ah, there's another one. Or: Oh I see. There's another one."

In Martin's memoir *Experience*, this set-piece is followed by a more poignant one. At a Sunday lunch, Martin described a haunting passage from Primo Levi's Holocaust chronicle *If This Is a Man*, only to swing around from the sideboard to find the old man covered in a Niagara of tears. Although it isn't hinted at by Leader, I would venture another explanation for Kingsley's prickliness about the tribe: It was *deliberate* with respect to Martin, who had taken for his adoptive literary father a novelist of a decidedly different kidney—Saul Bellow. In *Stanley and the Women*, the book that Stanley Duke's insane son pulls off the shelf and tears apart is Bellow's *Herzog*. Well, it was one way to have your cats-in-the-cradle moment.

Stanley and the Women led to Kingsley and the feminists. After his second wife, the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, left him, Amis sought revenge on the deadlier of the species. In *Jake's Thing*, published in 1978, a sexually enervated Oxford don undergoes all sorts of mortifying libido-enhancement therapies and psychological workshops, then wonders if the struggle is even worth it. Women "don't mean what they say, they don't use language for discourse but for extending their personality, they take all disagreement as opposition, yes they do, even the brightest of them, and that's the end of the search for truth which is what the whole thing's supposed to be about."

Yet it is Jake, at novel's end, who's left with his flaccid member and stalled career, soaking up trash television on the couch while his newly svelte wife runs off with the next-door neighbor. Jake is Jim Dixon a quarter-century on and fresh out of luck. Leader admirably reminds us that, near his own end, Amis struck up a friendship with a radical feminist named Rosie Boycott (which sounds like the name Martin would give a radical feminist in his fiction). Even his sexism was not without its contradictions.

"What's the secret of your howling successes—" Kingsley asked Don Juan in his poem, "Dirty Story." "Your tongue never tardy with the punch sentence, / Your you-know-what in fabulous readiness?" As with *Jake's Thing*, the secret was a downer: You can be a Lothario and live free and easy, but in the end, posterity will look on you with "uneasy reverence" because it glimpses "behind your glories / Our own nasty defeats, nastier victories." Amis had both in spades. How lucky for us. ♦

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Unhealthy Combination

How government and medicine don't mix.

BY MARK MILKE

If the first step toward a cured addiction is to admit the problem, Dr. David Gratzer has given himself no small task: to convince politicians that their reliance on government interference in health care hurts more Americans than it helps.

The Cure
How Capitalism Can Save American Health Care
by Dr. David Gratzer
Encounter, 240 pp., $25.95

For four decades, politicians from Wilbur Mills (the sixties-era chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee who championed Medicare and Medicaid) to George W. Bush either unapologetically used command-and-control economics in health care (Mills) or rhetorically championed market solutions only to preside over an expansion of taxpayer-financed versions (Bush and drug coverage). Now, given a Democratic-controlled Congress, the political temptation to intervene will likely only grow. For some, the appeal of intervention exists because Canada and Europe seemingly provide universal coverage at a lower percentage of Gross Domestic Product, though that ignores whether their expenditures are effective, or are enough. In *The Cure* Gratzer cautions Americans to avoid those models, as they have their own warts. On Canada, for example, the Winnipeg-born-and-trained physician, who now practices in Toronto and New York, has observed our two systems in detail—and the medical system lauded by the Dean-Clinton-Pelosi axis doesn't look so healthy under his microscope. In Canada, Soviet-style queues are the norm. The physician himself encountered horror stories familiar to any mildly informed Canadian: a middle-aged man with sleep problems booked to see a specialist—in three years; another patient with pain following a simple hernia repair referred to a pain clinic with a two-year waiting list; a woman with breast cancer asked to wait four months before beginning life-saving radiation therapy.

Canada has universal government health insurance; Americans should not equate that with universally speedy treatment. And ironically, just as some U.S. politicians praise government-controlled and delivered health care, Canada and Europe are moving towards market-based remedies for what ails them. In Stockholm, laboratory and support staff costs fell by 30 percent after that city contracted out most primary care. Germany will put most hospitals in private hands (a reform started by the Red-Green coalition), and one Finnish municipality has privatized *all* health provision. As Gratzer observes, even Canada is opening up to more private care, in part because a 2005 Supreme Court judgment forced the issue.

Meanwhile, back in America, over-involved government has created 100,000-plus pages of regulations for the Medicare program, Medicaid benefits so generous in New York that recipients can buy a month's supply of Viagra for just two dollars, and rampant abuse of the sort where 20 percent of Tennessee's budget-busting TennCare enrolees are ineligible but yet in the program.

Then there are the unintended conseq uences. Thanks to government reforms in New Jersey, a lease on a Ferrari is cheaper than health insurance for the average family. In Vermont in the 1990s, courtesy of then-governor Howard Dean, regulations forced insurance companies not to discriminate based on age—countering the point of insurance: risk assessment. That meant 20-year-olds paid the same as 60-year-olds. Many companies left the state and many young dropped their insurance. If the interfering political class care to blame someone for millions of uninsured, they need only look in the mirror.

On one major cost driver—pharmaceuticals—Gratzer notes how the cocktail of overregulation, trial lawyers, and "meek Food and Drug Administration bureaucrats" combined to make research hyperexpensive. It now costs $900 million to bring a new prescription drug to market. Adjusted for inflation, that's up from $138 million 30 years ago.

One suggested remedy (in addition to tort reform) is for the FDA to determine more quickly whether a drug is safe, approve it, and only then worry about how well or if it works. (After all, the author observes, it's not as if governments require automobile companies to prove their cars are not lemons.) The winners would be the sick and dying who might find efficacious treatment quicker rather than wait while a new experimental drug works its way through a bureaucratic and potentially litigious maze.

At the roots, Gratzer spots a similar cause for health care failures in Europe, Canada, and the United States: state interference that severs the doctor-patient payment link. The result is that patients have no incentive to find the same treatment for less money. Instead, third parties pay much of the bill.

What would car insurance cost, asks Gratzer rhetorically, if people insisted on plans that had limited deductibles? Or policies that included not just major body work, but also oil changes and gas and a paint job every time your spouse got tired of the car's color?

"If homeowners' insurance were regulated the way Governor Dean regulated health care, residents could insure their houses *after* they caught fire," he writes.

Mark Milke, a Canadian columnist, is the author of A Nation of Serfs?

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For the author of a policy book on health care, Gratzer (an occasional contributor to these pages) is an able storyteller, though he doesn't rely only on analogies. One solid strength of *The Cure*, which sets it apart from the usual dry, health care policy wonk work, is how his recommendations build on success stories. So to explain the usefulness of Health Savings Accounts and how they work, he notes the success of a similar model at Whole Foods, the grocery chain that offers employees consumer-driven health insurance, a plan built with their input. At Whole Foods, employees have a stake in managing health care costs because they can roll over leftover cash in their employer-supported, health savings-style accounts. The approach is popular, provides excellent coverage, and is effective at cost containment: It resulted in a 13 percent reduction in claim costs in its first year, and below-average increases in subsequent years.

Further reforms Gratzer recommends include giving individuals the same tax treatment for health insurance now available only to employers, and allowing consumers to buy insurance from another state. While the 1945 McCarran-Ferguson Act empowers states to regulate the business of insurance, "nothing prevents Congress from permitting interstate insurance sales, an action consistent with the Constitution's commerce clause." Gratzer notes that too many Americans are now at the mercy of a small number of local health insurance carriers.

Not that Congress need look far for reform ideas. The nine-million-member Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (which members of Congress are in) is an effective, choice-based insurance model. That program, tagged a "perfect model" by Gratzer, allows members to choose from more than 240 competing plans and is competitive and lightly regulated, even though it more generously covers the big-ticket items most of us want covered by insurance: long-term care, catastrophic events, and prescription drugs. But, writes Gratzer, "unlike Medicare, the program is not run by Washington, but is rather a composite of private plans." ♦

Verona Story

The New York City Ballet reinvents Romeo and Juliet.

BY PIA CATTON

Narrative ballets aren't really designed to make you think. They're more about delivering the works—from dazzling pointe work onstage to waterworks pouring from the eyes of sentimental fans. Even when a choreographer transposes a piece of literature to the stage, any grappling with the text tends to get buried under spectacle.

But New York City Ballet's Peter Martins took a different approach in his new production of *Romeo and Juliet*, which premiered May 1. By breaking with ballet traditions, he created a streamlined version that encourages critical thinking about the play.

When it comes to *Romeo and Juliet*, American audiences are probably most familiar with the 1965 production by Sir Kenneth MacMillan, which American Ballet Theater performs rapturously well. Operatic in scale, this version is long on make-me-swoon romance and heartbreak. If the MacMillan production is opera, then the Martins is off-Broadway. At City Ballet, the story is told in lean, minimalist terms: The ballet is reduced to two acts. Romeo's infatuation with Roseline is cut out. The backdrops are vibrant, abstract paintings of the Danish artist Per Kirkeby instead of *trompe l'oeil* scenery.

In casting the title roles, Martins gave the honors to some of the company's youngest talents. Out of four casts, the most experienced Juliet, Sterling Hyltin, was promoted to principal dancer on May 8 after having been a soloist for little more than a year. (By contrast, the traditional approach is to cast veteran dancers who have the stage and life experience to bring the house down.) But here, even Friar Laurence and the Nurse are lookers. Two of the most handsome men in the company, Nikolaj Hübbe and Ask la Cour, alternated the role of the Friar. The Nurse was danced by slim, attractive gals in the corps de ballet, including Georgina Pazcoguin and Amanda Hankes.

Beyond that, nonessential workers have been eliminated. There are no Montague parents, no extraneous passers-by in the market. The feud is communicated by two gangs of equal numbers of boys and girls from the corps. They make merry in the square, then advance on each other with a linearity that looks inspired by Jerome Robbins.

The set, designed by Kirkeby, is reduced to a rectangular, movable unit painted to look like gray stone, which defines every scene. It slides into different shapes in open view with the help of hidden stagehands. The ballet opens in front of these stony walls that suggest a public space. With the addition of curtains, it becomes Juliet's room. When a cross and an archway appear, it becomes the Friar's cell. And in the end, its walls become the tomb.

This pared-down version gives the viewer room for the imagination. By taking star power out of the equation, Martins gives us two young adults (the ages range from 23 to 18), not a marquee couple. With Kirkeby's jagged abstractions in the background, the visuals reinforce the dramatic tension rather than spelling out the settings for each scene. All of this allows a subtle aspect of the play to emerge: In this version, we witness the failure of a community, not just a doomed love affair.

One of the most significant failures in the play, as Allan Bloom wrote in

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Love & Friendship, is that of the Prince, who cannot control the fighting: "In Italy, the code of the clan reasserted itself as a result of the feebleness of the political rulers. The too gentle or merciful character of the princes is what Machiavelli blames and Shakespeare depicts," wrote Bloom.

In the ballet, the Prince, played by the majestic Albert Evans, makes a showy entrance when his subjects are at swords, and another after Tybalt's death. But as Evans's movements indicate, it's puffed-up power; more strut than stuff. In a deft choreographic decision, the Prince (and others) come to the tomb at the finale. Here, the Prince sees, and we remember, the effect of his mistakes.

The Friar also rushes to the tomb in the final tableau. And at that point, a younger fellow in the role makes some sense. The Friar Laurence—though he has good intentions—is, in the end, not all that wise. And maybe he's not all that old, either? The dialogue in the play suggests that Romeo perceives him as old; but when you're 14, a 30-year-old seems ancient.

Part of Bloom's analysis emphasizes the Friar's strategy for a cease-fire: "Friar Laurence tries to use a pair of rare and beautiful love birds as the means of restoring civil peace. But only their destruction permits the peace of death to descend over the two families, whose only heirs disappear." Add it all together and here's a young pacifist with a wide assortment of drugs who chooses to help two teenagers rebel—albeit through marriage—instead of alerting their parents or the authorities. Any wonder it turns out a tragedy?

As for those parents: The omission of the elder Montagues could be a simple matter of not wanting to clutter the stage. But it does raise the point: Where *are* that boy's parents? By contrast, the Capulets—danced by principal dancer Darci Kistler and former principal Jock Soto (who retired and came back for this role)—are doting, involved parents. Perhaps too involved: Juliet is dealt a loud slap from her father when she refuses to marry Paris. One side fails through absence, the other through force.

Paul Kolnik

Robert Fairchild, Sterling Hyltin

What of the Nurse? Useless. She fusses around the stage like a dim, older sister who indulges her sibling's appetites. When good advice is needed, Romeo and Juliet come up empty.

In terms of choreography, the duets are passionate and desperate, but largely aided by Sergei Prokofiev's beautiful music. Could the company principals have made something more of the dances? Possibly. But Martins has a penchant for rambling romantic choreography. The two casts I saw were led by Hyltin and Robert Fairchild on opening night, then Tiler Peck and Sean Suozzi on a Saturday afternoon. Of the four, Suozzi's performance was the most creative; he was an emotive yet tough Romeo from the first step. Peck grinned too much in Act I, but turned on the drama in Act II with subtle pauses and a more modulated stage presence. Fairchild was a dreamy Romeo whose head was maybe a little too much in the clouds to connect with Hyltin, a leggy, excitable Juliet.

But even if the *pas de deux* are not stellar, there is a point to consider. Told in this way, the story is not only about the lovers. They are central, but they are also part of a larger whole. Whereas MacMillian's balcony and bedroom scenes are so seared into my brain that I tear up just thinking about them, the take-away from the Martins production is the finale. The entire cast of characters enters the tomb and bears witness to a tragedy that each individual, in his own way, could have prevented.

City Ballet's *Romeo and Juliet* lets you think it through, and that is its greatest success. ♦

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Dubliners, 2007

Once *is a chick flick the guys might enjoy.*

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

Once is a deceptively accomplished piece of work. Even though it has the slapdash feel of a student film, *Once* is actually a remarkably innovative effort to redefine the movie musical. But that's not what accounts for *Once*'s offhanded but still immensely potent sweetness.

Once
Directed by John Carney

Markéta Irglová

Fox Searchlight Pictures

Two Dubliners meet, get to know each other a bit and, almost without realizing it, change each other's lives for the better. Along the way they sing songs, write songs, and spend a weekend in a recording studio. They are both kind and decent people and their relationship—more than a friendship, not really a love affair—is a godsend for both of them.

There's really nothing more touching in cinema than watching honorable people behave honorably, and being treated honorably in return. *Once* overflows with these grace notes.

During the day, a Dublin street musician (we never learn his name) plays a guitar so old and bruised that it is literally worn through. He sings popular songs for money during the day and performs his own material at night—raw, wounded, and beautiful songs about love and loss sung in a voice that rises from a gravelly baritone to a soaring falsetto. He is played by a little-known Irish rocker named Glen Hansard, who isn't going to be little-known much longer.

As dusk falls, a pretty girl (we're not told her name, either) with a Middle European accent walks through the street mall selling flowers. She stops by, listens, and asks if he wrote the song for someone. Yes, he says, for a woman in London who cheated on him. Sing that for her, she says, and you'll get her back.

He works at and lives above his father's vacuum repair shop. She brings him a vacuum to fix, and on the bus ride back to the shop, he improvises a country song called "Broken Hearted Hoover Fixer Sucker Guy."

Everywhere they go, they make music together. She takes him to a piano shop whose proprietor lets her play during lunch hour. He gives her a chart of a song called "Falling Slowly" and they harmonize perfectly. He is finding it hard to write lyrics these days and asks if she would like to collaborate.

Listening to a CD of his music, she writes words in a dark room in a dingy apartment with her infant daughter asleep next to her. She is Czech, and has come to Dublin with her mother and without her husband, who does not appreciate her. Her Walkman runs out of batteries, and she goes to a store at midnight in her pajamas to buy more.

As she walks the four blocks home, she sings the song she has just written. Cars pass by, people sit on stoops, roller skaters move in and out of frame. Writer-director John Carney films the scene in two understated but bravura takes. An angelic teenager named Markéta Irglová, who plays the girl, grows ever more beatific as she sings in a high and breathy voice. And for a moment, the dim Dublin street seems almost like the drenched Hollywood soundstage on which Gene Kelly danced "Singin' in the Rain."

Once doesn't have much of a plot. The guitarist makes a pass at the girl. She rebuffs him and he apologizes. She knows he's in love with someone else. He knows she's married. The movie's conceit is that they have something deeper than love between them. Each is a muse for the other. She gives him the energy and enthusiasm to record his songs and try to make a life for himself as a professional musician. He brings her back to music, which makes her feel alive and young and free.

They treat each other with respect. And the people they encounter do so as well. The guitarist's depressed father surges to life listening to his music. A banker whom they approach for a small-business loan takes out a guitar and sings his songs for them. A sound engineer at the studio they rent scoffs at their amateurishness until he gives a listen to the first song they record—and then he becomes an ardent helpmeet for them.

I don't want to overburden or overpraise *Once*. It's a slight thing, a mood piece. But it is an achievement. *Once* is the visual and aural equivalent of an experience once common to people of a certain age: listening to an album on a scratchy, third-rate turntable by a recording artist of whom you've never heard who catches your attention, holds it, and so excites you that by the time the needle reaches the end of Side One, you can barely wait to pull the album up and flip it over for Side Two. ♦

John Podhoretz, a columnist for the New York Post, *is* THE WEEKLY STANDARD*'s movie critic.*

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Parody

"Senator Barack Obama proposed a major overhaul of the nation's health care system . . . aimed at covering the nearly 45 million uninsured Americans and reducing premium costs for everyone else. . . . The Obama plan drew from a long line of Democratic policy thinking; it reflects elements of proposals put forward by the Clintons, by Senator John Kerry in his 2004 presidential campaign and by former Senator John Edwards this year." **—New York Times, *May 30***

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the weekly Standard
JUNE 11, 2007

eral role in regulating
r health care, particu-
ases. But it would stop
short of creating a Canadian-style system in

require parents to obtain insurance for their children through an employer, a government program, or on their own.

The plan's most far-reaching aspect

much of the inefficiency and waste that make the U.S. health care system the world's costliest.

"We have reached a point in this country where the rising cost of health care has

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